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Economic Subjugation and Crime in a Capitalist Context: Using The Wire to Understand the Contemporary American City

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Economic Subjugation and Crime in a Capitalist Context:
Using *The Wire* to Understand the Contemporary American City

An Honors Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Program in African American Studies
Bates College
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By
Ellis O'Brien
Lewiston, Maine
March 20th 2019

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Abstract

This paper conducts a detailed economic examination of certain key neighborhoods in the city of Baltimore to understand the forces at play in the television series, The Wire, and also to use The Wire to better understand those neighborhoods. Lauding its realism, critics and scholars widely regard The Wire as popular culture's most accurate depiction of the post-industrial American City. In an effort to describe the impacts of the economic landscape of Baltimore on human experience, this paper provides the first known empirical analysis of the effects of redlining on contemporary income and incarceration rates using rigorous statistical methods. Because it disproportionately disenfranchised black communities, redlining had a profound effect on the economic and social life of those communities. Using this analysis as a framework, this thesis describes the economic milieu of The Wire in an historical context and shows how specific economic policies and political dynamics lead to the poverty and violence portrayed in the show. This study demonstrates that deliberately enacted policies forced African Americans into specific metropolitan areas and that, simultaneously, public and private entities made concerted efforts to limit economic resources and opportunity in these areas. The Wire reveals the effects of this subjugation through multiple aspects of its narrative. The television series vividly represents inaccessible housing, the collapsing school system, the high crime rate, and the shortage of legal forms of industry—all of which are consequences of redlining. This thesis argues that the crime depicted in The Wire is a practical response to a lack of access to formal economic institutions. Broadly, it uses The Wire and detailed economic analysis to

uncover how America's inequitable policies have led to the Dickensian state of the contemporary American city.

Introduction

I recently attended my fourth Martin Luther King Jr. Day at Bates college. Professors and panelists from around the country led nuanced discussions on topics ranging from sexual violence to freedom of speech that illuminated the day's theme, "Lifting Every Voice: Intersectionality and Activism." While the array of topics nibbled at the edges of addressing racialized economic inequality, overt discussion of the economic landscape of the U.S was notably absent from the MLK Day commemoration. Law professor and American civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw originally coined the term "intersectionality" to address hiring discrimination by American firms (Crenshaw, 1989). So, by restricting our MLK Day discussions to social issues, the economic impacts of intersectionality was lost. This failure to address the intersection of race and economics directly is emblematic of the national discourse surrounding Martin Luther King Jr.'s work and, ultimately, problematic to the discourse surrounding racism in the U.S.

While the vast majority of Americans believe racism is a serious problem in America (Neal, 2017), too frequently Americans discuss racism as a social issue—fundamentally a problem in the way people relate to one another. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr. is widely regarded as a unifying civil rights activist who helped achieve equality between white and black America. He is infrequently discussed as a radical economic thinker who developed innovative methods to harness the forces of capitalism and cripple supremacist mechanisms of control. Dr. King said his own agenda "extended well beyond bus desegregation" (King, 1956). Many of Dr. King's advisors believed he should have focused less on civil rights and more on economic

issues (Jones, 2005). I have even spoken to individuals in Oakland with direct ties to the Black Panther and Civil Rights Movement who believe Dr. King was assassinated only after and because he decided to make economic inequality his primary focus, with the aim of uniting black and white within the working class. This financial aspect of Dr. King's message is, however, frequently lost in mainstream discussions of his life (West, 2018).

Dr. King was by no means alone in his desire to effect racial economic freedom. Virtually every black leader of the post civil war-era focused on black economic independence. Booker T. Washington famously believed that the only way to achieve racial equality in the U.S. was through black ownership of appreciating capital assets and a bank account (Washington, 1896). Although many black intellectuals criticized Washington for his accommodationist attitudes (Coates, 2009), he stood steadfastly by the idea that if black Americans applied themselves independently to their own education and wealth accumulation, white Americans would have no choice but eventually to accept them. Whether or not subsequent black scholars shared these attitudes, they all understood the importance of black capital ownership (Baradaran, 2017).

Contemporary historians are now beginning to realize W.E.B Du Bois made significant contributions as an economist—in addition to his primary efforts as a sociologist. Du Bois came a few course units away from earning a doctorate in political economy and was one of the first scholars to empirically examine how discriminatory racial policies impacted economic mobility for African Americans (Prasch, 2008). Du Bois famously wrote, “To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships” (Du Bois, 1897).

Perhaps no individual emphasized the importance of black economic independence more than entrepreneur Marcus Garvey. Garvey built an international business conglomerate and believed that black enterprise represented salvation: "The Negro is perishing because he has no economic system" (Shipp, 1996). Garvey had no interest in integration with white America, believing that the culturally ingrained supremacist attitudes the majority of the population harbored were too great to overcome. Garvey summed up his views by saying "Be Black, Buy Black, Think Black, and all else will take care of itself!" (Adam Tones & Simon Lemieux, 2019). A student of Garvey's teachings, Malcolm X, revitalized Garvey's tenets a generation later. Malcolm X refused to try to appeal to white America for any form of equality; rather, his focus was on a revolution that would allow black Americans to own capital and enterprises so that black dollars would not be flowing to white businesses. He said:

The economic philosophy of black nationalism only means that our people need to be re-educated into the importance of controlling the economy of the community in which we live, which means that we won't have to constantly be involved in picketing and boycotting other people in other communities in order to get jobs. (X, 1964)

Malcolm thought Harlem accurately represented the general economic landscape of America, given that black residents paid rent to white landlords and shopped at white businesses. These dollars were continuously leaving the black community to line the pockets of whites, adding to the cycles of poverty in the urban ghetto (Baradaran, 2017). To Malcolm X, shifting this paradigm by taking control of this process was the only way to achieve racial equality in the United States.

Despite the great political and legal success of the Civil Rights Movement, many members of the black community saw it as a defeat (Donohue & Heckman, 1991). The assassination of prominent black leaders and reformers derailed revolutionary attitudes and the war on poverty of the late '60s quietly ended, replaced by a war on drugs and crime that spanned the rest of the century. The general economic environment of America remained stagnant, and blacks were still clearly second-class citizens in terms of wealth acquisition and assets. The lack of progress towards economic equality in America since the Civil Rights era is, now, particularly concerning. Although black home ownership rates crept to almost 50% in the early 2000's, the economic shock of the housing crisis showed how tenuous that progress was. In 2016 just 41.7% of African Americans owned homes (MarksJarvis, 2017). In 1970, two years after the Fair Housing Act of 1968 passed, 41.6% of African Americans owned homes (Andrews, 2018). This 0.1% increase in the 46 years following the "landmark" legislation is incomprehensibly poor.

In terms of proportional racial wealth, there has been some improvement, albeit very little. In 1963, the median white family was worth \$47,600, while the median non-white family was worth \$2,500 (Urban Institute, 2016) . Currently, the median white family is worth approximately \$171,000, while the median African American family has a net worth of approximately \$17,000—an increase in comparative wealth from 5.2% to 9.9% (Dettling, 2017). Despite the improvement, the disparity remains appalling.

The rate of incarceration for African Americans relative to whites has gotten worse over roughly the same period. In 1960, there were 1,313 African American inmates per 100,000 individuals as compared to 262 white inmates per 100,000 (Carson, 2015). In 2010, there were 4,347 African American inmates per 100,000 individuals as compared to 678 white inmates per

100,000 (Carson, 2015). The comparative ratio of white inmates to black inmates has thus decreased from 20% to 15.6%, an overall disturbing trend. Yet, while mass incarceration and racial profiling deservedly get attention from scholars and activists alike, it seems as though economic inequality has fallen out of the primary conversation surrounding race in America.

At the time of this writing, the Bates College politics, history, rhetoric, religious studies, gender and sexuality studies, sociology, and English departments are offering courses that are cross-listed with African American studies and critically examine the role race has played in shaping our cultural systems. Missing from this list is the Bates economics department, which offers no courses on economic inequality in the U.S and has no professors who study how the American economy has been constructed along racial lines. In popular culture, the phenomenon is similar. The Black Lives Matter movement mobilized around the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, and restored national attention in times of civil unrest and turmoil, such as the 2017 Charlottesville protest. “Systemic racism” is often used to explain these tragic events, but the failure to address the underlying power dynamics obscures its true meaning because little is being done to address the underlying power dynamics.

None of this is to deny the significant amount of intricate overlap between social and economic frameworks, or to say that addressing and solving these issues is not critically important. Rather, it is to highlight the need for the national discourse surrounding racism to shift towards a more holistic perspective, one focused on fundamentally rearranging the economically defined power structures in America. This paper will trace a wide array of supremacist manifestations in today’s society back to racialized economic policy.

Lack of attention and visibility limits the discourse on racial economic disparities today. There is very little newsworthy about generations of structural racism continuously shaping our economic system. Perhaps the best place to begin the discussion of economic inequality and crime in Baltimore, the geographic focus of this thesis, is with the April, 2015 murder of Freddie Gray—arguably the most high profile murder in the history of a city that routinely suffers 250 homicides a year. The murder of Gray garnered national attention after his violent death in the back of a police wagon following his arrest for allegedly carrying an illegal knife (Barajas, 2015). The tragic event became a sustained news story as riots and demonstrations ensued. The unrest led to over 250 protester arrests and at least 20 officer injuries. Property damage from burning, looting, and other causes extended across hundreds of buildings (Stolberg, 2015). While the tragedy of Gray's death is deeply significant itself, the event represented issues in Baltimore much broader than police brutality alone. Gray's murder was the consequence of generations of economic depression, housing instability, deficient public investment, and inadequate education. Simply put, Freddie Gray's death was a byproduct of generations of structural racism, forces much more powerful than police brutality, forces police did not themselves control. This omission in reporting on the event reveals that even the most progressive news and analysis surrounding race have lost sight of the larger picture. While stopping police brutality is an essential piece to the puzzle of racial equality in the U.S, it ultimately can only be viewed as a piece.

Freddie Gray was initially arrested in Sandtown-Winchester, one of Baltimore's most desolate neighborhoods. One third of homes are vacant, a third of the neighborhood lives in poverty, 3% of "Sandtown's" population is incarcerated, and life expectancy is 10 years less than

the national average. Maryland spends \$17 million per year just to incarcerate the residents from this small West Baltimore neighborhood (Ashkenas et al., 2015). It is not surprising that the drug trade is flourishing as the crack and opioid epidemics have had devastating impacts. This neighborhood has not always been in such a state. In the first half of the 20th century, Sandtown was referred to as Baltimore's Harlem. It was once home to Thurgood Marshall and Billie Holiday and hosted a thriving black middle class (Rosenwald & Fletcher, 2015).

Unfortunately, however, as in many other black metropolitan areas, the prosperity of Sandtown was not long lived. Sandtown began to collapse at roughly the time as the formal end of Jim Crow and the legislation granting civil rights was enacted (Ashkenas et al., 2015). There is no obvious explanation for the coincidence of timing between the demise of Sandtown and the legal protection of civil rights. But one can explore the economics of the area in an attempt to make sense of it. Sandtown-Winchester is in the heart of West Baltimore. When the Federal Housing Authority commissioned residential security maps to influence lending and investment practices, this area was classified as "red" or "least desirable." Theoretically, the government contractors making the assessments based them on a variety of factors that determined neighborhood quality such as infrastructure and home quality. In practice, however, the assessments were based largely on the racial composition of the neighborhood.

While this practice of redlining only formally lasted from the 1930s to the 1960s, scholars argue that its effects persist to this day (Aaronson et al., 2017). Accordingly, Sandtown has seen a steady economic decline since the 1930s, with restricted credit access and investment stifling growth in the area, leading to few formal employment opportunities and under-funded public services. In the absence of legitimate economic opportunity, the drug trade and crime

flourished as individuals searched for ways to acquire wealth outside the limited legal means to do so. The Baltimore Police Department (BPD) increased patrol and active enforcement in high crime areas as a means of combating the drug trade (Simon, 1997). This increased patrol has led to an increasingly fraught and tenuous police/community relationship, with citizens frequently complaining about police brutality and wrongful arrests. The city now pays millions in misconduct settlements every year (Collins, 2017), and the department of justice concluded that the BPD "regularly discriminated against black residents in poor communities" (Bui & Hermann, 2016). There is nothing unusual about police violently arresting a resident of West Baltimore and throwing them into the back of a patrol wagon.

The riots subsequent to the murder of Freddie Gray helped temper police brutality. Arrests and complaints about officer aggression and use of undue force fell significantly (Gatley, 2017). Still, the decline in complaints of police brutality does nothing to offset the deep-seated problems plaguing Baltimore. The police brutality that ostensibly killed Freddie Gray is a conspicuous symptom, but one that persistently distracts attention from the more fundamental syndrome of extreme economic discrimination, primarily executed through redlining, that has condemned whole communities in Baltimore and elsewhere for nearly a century. Before Mr. Gray's death came generations of subjugation and neglect—designed, developed, and enacted by the state, with the facade of white supremacy ideology creating a diversion. The role of one element, such as police brutality, within the complex system born not just of generations, but of centuries of subjugation, is a thread to follow when analyzing the social fabric, but it is not the cloth itself.

In fact, in recent years the official homicide rate in Baltimore has skyrocketed, jumping from an average of 222 per year in the three years before Mr. Gray's death to 335 per year in the years since (Baltimore Sun, 2019). Pundits, policy-analysts, and observers of all stripes have speculated as to the cause (Lowery et al., 2018). When the producer and writer of the hit television series *The Wire*, David Simon, who has lived in and written about Baltimore his whole life, was asked about the increase in violent crime following the death of Freddie Gray, he had an interesting take, saying:

What [Baltimore City State's Attorney Marilyn] Mosby basically did was send a message to the Baltimore police department: "I'm going to put you in jail for making a bad arrest." So officers figured it out: "I can go to jail for making the wrong arrest, so I'm not getting out of my car to clear a corner," and that's exactly what happened post-Freddie Gray. (Gately, 2017)

Even Simon, who for years has been a progressive voice calling for greater equity, presents a simplified, crime-focused view of a complex problem, one which ultimately fails to provide much insight to the interlocking, nuanced, and historically structured systems that make for the contemporary reality of life in Baltimore.

While Simon's answer to this particular question may be simplistic, the show he produced is not. This paper uses *The Wire*, Simon's fictional television series, to illuminate the contemporary interplay of issues of violence, poverty, and racial inequality in Baltimore. By doing so, it seeks to shed light more broadly on the reverberations of historical economic inequity in the contemporary American city. *The Wire* implicitly illustrates the many capitalist mechanisms that continue to drive racial disparities in economic opportunity in Baltimore. The situation is both acute and historic: urban life in the 21st century and the legacy of intransigent

institutional structures cyclically renewed. Simon himself describes this condition as “the triumph of capitalism over human value” (Lynskey, 2018).

With this statement, Simon encapsulates the cold heart of *The Wire*. It is a deep exploration of the social, psychic, moral, and spiritual costs borne in a capitalist political economy—in this case, economy grown from and still dependent on racial inequity. This essential observation is a greater truth than any linear logic or simple statement about causality, such as Simon’s view, quoted above, about police motivation. In turning its lens on the lived experience of Baltimoreans, *The Wire* reveals not an informational truth or mere factuality, but a truth that adds new dimensions to one’s experience, provides one an expanding vision, and moves one emotionally as well. In its verisimilitude, this artistic truth addresses itself to reality, and, grounded in it, also addresses possibility. Its scope is material, social, emotional, imaginary, and spiritual as it illuminates a vision not otherwise accessible. It shows us, in terms fresh and poetic, the link between race and capitalism.

Starting with initial colonization of the Americas, the concept of race was used to justify slavery and provide cheap labor for the agricultural complex of the south. Following the ratification of the 13th Amendment, definitions of race were still used to enforce unjust vagrancy laws and restrict labor and property rights for black Americans. In the 20th century, white America found ways to profit by restricting blacks’ access to home ownership as well as by imprisoning black Americans, providing the impetus for detrimental policies such as redlining and the war on drugs. *The Wire* provides specific depictions of how these historic capitalist dynamics have shaped the inequality we see in contemporary American cities. The aim of this paper is to untangle the wide array of capitalist forces that have caused the violent and

destructive urban conditions portrayed in the series. *The Wire* is, therefore, about the failures of capitalism. It is a discourse on how capitalism has been used to inexorably subjugate those whose access to capital can be restricted or denied.

The first chapter of this paper discusses redlining and the discriminatory federal policy that has created the two worlds of Baltimore. The second chapter addresses housing—more specifically, how white America has consistently found ways to profit from limiting black property ownership. The third chapter focuses on employment and the ways a decline in industrial jobs and a lack of access to formal industry leads to the violent drug economy dramatized in *The Wire*. The final chapter focuses on public education, examining how underfunded public schools contribute to cycles of poverty in Baltimore. In essence, unlike most of the scholarly work on *The Wire*, this paper is not about the characters, plot, or cinematography; it is about the one constant of the series, the institutions in Baltimore that are the engine for the narrative.

Chapter 1: Empirically Examining the Impact of Redlining in Baltimore

“The places where there is the most violence are the same that the city has historically neglected with its own public dollars.” Stephanie M. Smith, Baltimore Assistant Director for Equity, Engagement, and Communications (2017)

Introduction

Baltimore was the first city in the country to pass ordinances that required segregation of white and black Americans (Abello, 2017). To this day, this history of division shapes how the city operates. In a 2013 speech titled *There are now two Americas. My country is a horror show.*, David Simon discusses how capitalist ideology, coupled with racist policy, has lead America into a state of rampant inequality:

America is a country that is now utterly divided when it comes to its society, its economy, its politics. There are definitely two Americas. I live in one, on one block in Baltimore that is part of the viable America, the America that is connected to its own economy, where there is a plausible future for the people born into it. About 20 blocks away is another America entirely. (Simon, 2013)

What Simon does not explicitly state is that 20 blocks away is a non-viable America, an America where there is limited future for those born there. The fracture between it and Simon’s America is a gap few can cross.

This phenomenon reflects the essence of capitalism; it is a wonderful means of wealth accumulation for those in power with access to resources, but for the powerless, capitalism is a

ruthless system of oppression. The dual nature of our capitalist cultural system is depicted throughout *The Wire*. Throughout the show, we see the professional world of politicians, lobbyists, lawyers, and real estate developers who carve out nice lives for themselves. Their children go to private, well-funded schools and presumably grow up to be productive, legal capitalists like their parents. But in the interstices of this formal, legally-sanctioned world exists a complex informal one, an economy comprised primarily of the drug trade, prostitution, and other criminal activity. It obeys the same ruthless rules of capitalism, but other than the money-laundering opportunities it shares with its white-collar analog, this parallel illicit economy is unregulated, except by the police on the street and the prison system. This is the world David Simon discusses in his speech. In *The Wire*, it is the world of the terraces and the low rises; it is the world where the Barksdale drug organization is the largest employer of labor in a shadow company town.

This duality is not necessarily a product of free market capitalism. In the U.S and most of the world, free markets are largely a myth. Those in power wield markets as a tool to further increase profit. So when examining how capitalism has shaped understandings of race in America, it is important to remember that those in power have used laws to shape and bend market forces to be discriminatory. Markets are not inherently discriminatory. Exemplifying this notion is the practice of redlining, which economists and social scientists consider to be as instrumental as any policy in the twentieth-century for creating the “two America’s” Simon discussed. In his 2013 speech, Simon says, “There's no barbed wire around West Baltimore or around East Baltimore, around Pimlico, the areas in my city that have been utterly divorced from the American experience that I know. But there might as well be” (Simon, 2013). What Simon

does not mention is that little less than a century ago, the federal government made residential security maps that effectively put economic fences around these areas, cutting them off from the formal economy. These areas were not necessarily rundown or impoverished neighborhoods at the time, they were just predominantly black neighborhoods in a time when politicians were terrified of the effects of integration.

What is redlining and how did it put economic fences around East and West Baltimore? Redlining was implemented following the Great Depression as a way of classifying neighborhoods according to specified property appraisal practices in order to allow housing lenders to better manage their risk. Neighborhoods that received better classifications saw higher levels of credit access, investment, and property ownership by its inhabitants. Given that these classifications were largely based on race (Berkovec et al., 1994), there is little doubt redlining played a significant role in maintaining, if not increasing, America's racial segregation and in limiting economic mobility for African Americans.

Using the original redline maps for Baltimore, this chapter derives estimates of the contemporary effects of redlining on income and the rate of incarceration in this city. The chapter presents an empirical study, using economic and statistical methods, to speak to the actual impacts of redlining in the city of Baltimore. As such, it departs from the more literary type of analysis that characterizes the rest of this thesis. In doing so, it provides an historical and quantitative grounding for understanding the spatial context of *The Wire*. It adds a new dimension to existing analyses of *The Wire* that previous humanistic and social scientific studies do not address (e.g., see Bdzack, Crosby & Vannatta, 2013 on *The Wire*'s philosophical dimensions; Beilenson & McGuire, 2012 on its relationship to public health issues). Current

literature on *The Wire* does, to be sure, applaud and examine the brilliance of the series as realistic television drama—it's verisimilitude in capturing the gritty, Dickensian reality of “Bodysmore, Murderland” (Crosby, 2013, p. 4) and the convincing account it gives of the near impossibility for anyone to escape its cruel, destructive logic (noting that Cutty and Bubbles¹ are two characters who serve more as exceptions that prove this rule rather than otherwise).

Widespread accolades for *The Wire*'s realism do not, however, amount to means for connecting it with scholarly precision to the material and historical features of the phenomenal world that served as the show's inspiration. This chapter, therefore, adds some weight to the gut feeling of why *The Wire*, in artistic terms, rings so true. The intent is not to use *The Wire* to justify the economic analysis as much as to use the economic analysis to justify *The Wire*. My intent is to add to the appreciation for the illuminating vision of the contemporary American city, its policies and poverty, that *The Wire* provides.

In economic terms, this study's empirical analysis shows that the metaphorically fenced-in areas of the city can be proven to link causally to the fate of residents in those areas. While not entirely deterministic, where one is born—either on one side or the other of the boundaries between red and yellow, blue and green—does shape life experience, opportunity, and outcome for residents in each district. This economic analysis finds a statistically significant relationship between the historical redline boundaries and contemporary income in redlined areas. Children born now in areas that received lower redline grades decades ago are shown to have notably lower projected future incomes. More importantly, levels of income vary sharply at

¹ Cutty is an ex-con who finds employment as a gardener. He also starts an after school boxing gym to keep kids off the streets. Bubbles is a drug addict and criminal informant for most of the show, however, in Season Five he gets clean and volunteers at a local soup kitchen.

redline borders, indicating a causal relationship between redlining and contemporary income. The link between redlining and incarceration rates is weaker, but my analysis still shows that individuals born into lower-graded redline districts are more likely to be incarcerated.

The History of Redlining and the Demographics of Baltimore

In the aftermath of the Great Depression, the United States economy floundered as it suffered from market uncertainty due to the overextension of credit and the collapse of the stock market. As a result of this uncertainty, consumers stopped purchasing durable goods which led to a subsequent collapse of prices in the housing market and a sharp increase in foreclosure rates (Romer, 1990). While the foreclosure rate was virtually 0% in the economic boom of the 1920's, it rose to as high as 7% in New York city in 1935 (Ghent, 2011). President Franklin Delano Roosevelt responded to this economic crisis with the New Deal, which aimed to relieve, recover, and reform the economy. Part of FDR's New Deal reform effort was the Housing Act of 1934, which created the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) (Jeffries, 1990).

Congress tasked the FHA with regulating the domestic housing market by monitoring interest rates and insuring loans. The additional regulations in the housing market were designed to increase market security and reduce subprime lending. The establishment of the FHA, however, was also the impetus that prompted the beginning of redlining. In 1932, the Federal Home Loan Bank Act was passed which gave the Federal Home Loan and Bank Board (FHLBB) the responsibility of overseeing the domestic lending market. One of the largest and most impactful agencies the FHLBB oversaw was the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC),

which by 1936 had refinanced 10% of residential mortgages in just three years of existence (Fishback et. al, 2011).

A year after the creation of the FHA, the FHLBB contracted the HOLC to create residential security maps for over 239 cities. The agency created the maps to aid lenders in the loan process by ensuring sufficient information flow to creditors so they could make more informed credit decisions. While the federal government was generally interested in property values for its own investment purposes as well as in protecting the United States credit market, its primary concern was preventing future mortgage crises. In theory, home quality, property prices, infrastructure, and education levels along with other factors were supposed to guide security map makers in the classifications of these neighborhoods. However, in practice, neighborhood grades were based largely on race and nationality. The Federal Housing Authority angled to exclude African Americans from white neighborhoods in order to prevent "inharmonious racial groups" (Schill & Wachter, 1995).

The HOLC hired thousands of private contractors in order to create the 239 city-wide maps and conduct over 5 million property appraisals. These contractors, coupled with neighborhood surveys, demographics, and economic characteristics of neighborhoods, were used as the mechanism for determining the color-coded neighborhood grades. The contractors and appraisers hired were not shy about using racially motivated language in the making of the maps. Even more troubling, the HOLC and the FHLBB willingly adopted language regarding "homogeneity," "lack of homogeneity," and "undesirable population" in its rating guidance.

The Johns Hopkins Library has preserved the 1937 HOLC appraisals manual which describes how neighborhoods should be graded. The maps were comprised of four distinct

categories: “A” neighborhoods were green and described as “homogeneous and in demand during good times or bad.” “B” neighborhoods were blue and described as a “1935 automobile – still good, but not what the people are buying today who can afford a new one.” “C” neighborhoods were yellow and described as having “expiring restrictions or lack of them [and] a infiltration of a lower grade population.” They also lack homogeneity which is a requisite for being a blue or green neighborhood. Finally, The red neighborhoods were given a D grade and described as having “detrimental influences in a pronounced degree, undesirable population of an infiltration of it.”

It is not difficult to see how race shaped the HOLC grading practices, as the “undesirable” and “lower grade” populations are clearly referring to non-white communities. These assessments were based on the notion that urban decay would inevitably occur. This theory was echoed by Chief FHA economist Homer Hoyt as he argued the African American great migration of the early 20th century and an influx of European immigrants would cause home prices to drop in urban areas, while wealthier white families opted for more comfortable and spacious homes in the outskirts of the city (Hillier, 2003).

It is widely debated whether the HOLC used redlining in its own lending activities because the HOLC did the majority of its mortgage refinancing before the maps were officially published. The HOLC did, however, engage in the practice of “racial steering” in order to promote urban homogeneity (Hillier, 2005). The HOLC residential security maps had a profound effect on private lending. While it is still unclear whether lending institutions had access to the exact security maps the HOLC used (Hillier, 2003), the HOLC released mapping guidelines so private institutions could create their own redline maps. Thus, in the late 1930s and 1940s it

became a common practice for banks and other creditors to create their own security maps based on federal guidelines (Woods, 2012). There is ample anecdotal evidence suggesting lenders had access to, or created their own security maps (Greer, 2012).

While the HOLC and FHLBB may have tried to minimize their use of these maps with regards to their lending practices, it is argued the FHA did not (Keating, 1994). There is evidence the FHA insurance standards were based largely on these racially motivated maps, and it would not insure loans that did not meet its standards. Between 1935 and 1950, the FHA insured 2.7 million loans, but only 1.8% of those loans went to African Americans—half of which were required under a military housing program (Commission on Civil Rights, 1959). Following the Great Depression, lenders largely refused to issue loans that were not FHA insured out of fear of another calamitous economic collapse. Consequently, African Americans were unable to receive loans to purchase houses in a era when the American middle class was being created. Redlining can be seen, accordingly, as a primary force behind African Americans' exclusion from the housing market.

The city of Baltimore has suffered a distinct demographic decline in the decades since the advent of redlining. In 2017, Baltimore had a population of 611,478, with a significant suburban population of 2.8 million residing outside of the city. The discrepancy between the suburbs and the city has not always been this large, however. In 1930 Baltimore had a population of 804,874 (United States Census, 1930). Between 1950 and 2000 Baltimore lost almost a third of its population. A decline in industrial jobs in Baltimore coupled with redlining led to the decrease in population. White flight occurred as African Americans moved into the city while fear-mongering real estate agents urged white homeowners in the city to sell their homes (SEIU,

2003). The implementation of redlining also meant investment stopped flowing into the center of Baltimore, so those who could afford to move out did. African Americans were realistically only allowed to purchase or rent homes in the center, red and yellow, areas of the city. At the same time, the drop in industrial jobs in urban Baltimore crippled the working class. This, combined with the population shift to Baltimore county, collapsed the city's tax base, leaving the city in the state of poverty it finds itself today (Bouie, 2015). Redlining was a large reason for this population shift as high-ranking government officials and banks decided to divert resources away from urban areas and focus on suburban development (Abello, 2017).

In sum, the economic landscape of Baltimore has not improved in the last century. While some African Americans have been able to leave inner city “red” areas in recent decades, these districts still consist almost exclusively of African American residents. In *The Wire*, street activity takes place in the red “least desirable” districts, environments rife with poverty, criminality, drug use, and violence. The depiction of street life in historically redlined districts is not a coincidence. These districts epitomize the figurative inner city in the cultural imagination and the literal one geographically as well. The grading of neighborhoods on race, resulting from redlining policies, lies at the root of these outcomes. Accordingly, the study of redlining opens the door for a heightened understanding of America’s racialized economic landscape.

Redlining and the Economic Geography of Baltimore

While the impacts of redlining on the geography, the population dynamics, and the tax base of the city are relatively easy to deduce from the history described above, making an evidence-based argument for its impacts on the lives of persons constrained to residing within

the barbed-wire, as Simon sees it, surrounding East and West Baltimore is much more difficult. The entirety of *The Wire* as a project might, in fact, be viewed as an artists' inspired, and likely unwitting, corrective to the problem of proving the human cost of redlining, showing it to be one of the most consequential racialized policies of the past century. However much Simon and his co-creators may or may not have known about actual redlining policies, the stark experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for residents of redlined districts drew the writers' attention. What is dramatic, compelling, and crying for exploration in the city of Baltimore is its boundaries—metaphoric ones, to be sure, but physically palpable ones as well. The differences in material circumstance across boundaries that characterize Baltimore's landscape are, moreover, not unique in the American city. Simon is a child of Baltimore, but he could have told a similar story about Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, or Los Angeles. The stark and compelling racialized contrasts that result from America's urban fences demand explanation.

Yet, despite being oft discussed in popular culture and the source of extensive speculation, empirical economic analyses of redlining are sparse. This lack of scholarly attention to redlining, particularly its long-term impacts, is due at least in part to difficulties in obtaining the necessary relevant data. The Digital Scholarship Lab (DSL) at the University of Richmond only recently digitized the 239 original HOLC residential security maps created to decide the credit access and investment for given neighborhoods—i.e., the red, yellow, blue, and green coded districts that effectively structured the racial distribution of populations in American cities. These district-by-district maps are at the heart of this study's empirical analysis, providing the independent variable data for my work. The geocoded maps cover the entire geographic area of Baltimore as well as the majority of its immediate suburbs. The DSL maps, published in 2016,

are the first known effort to digitize and geocode the original HOLC maps, and they have opened the door to an elevated study of the contemporary effects of redlining (e.g., Aaronson et al., 2017). The DSL also includes the original description of the neighborhood in question and its demographics and favorable/unfavorable influences.

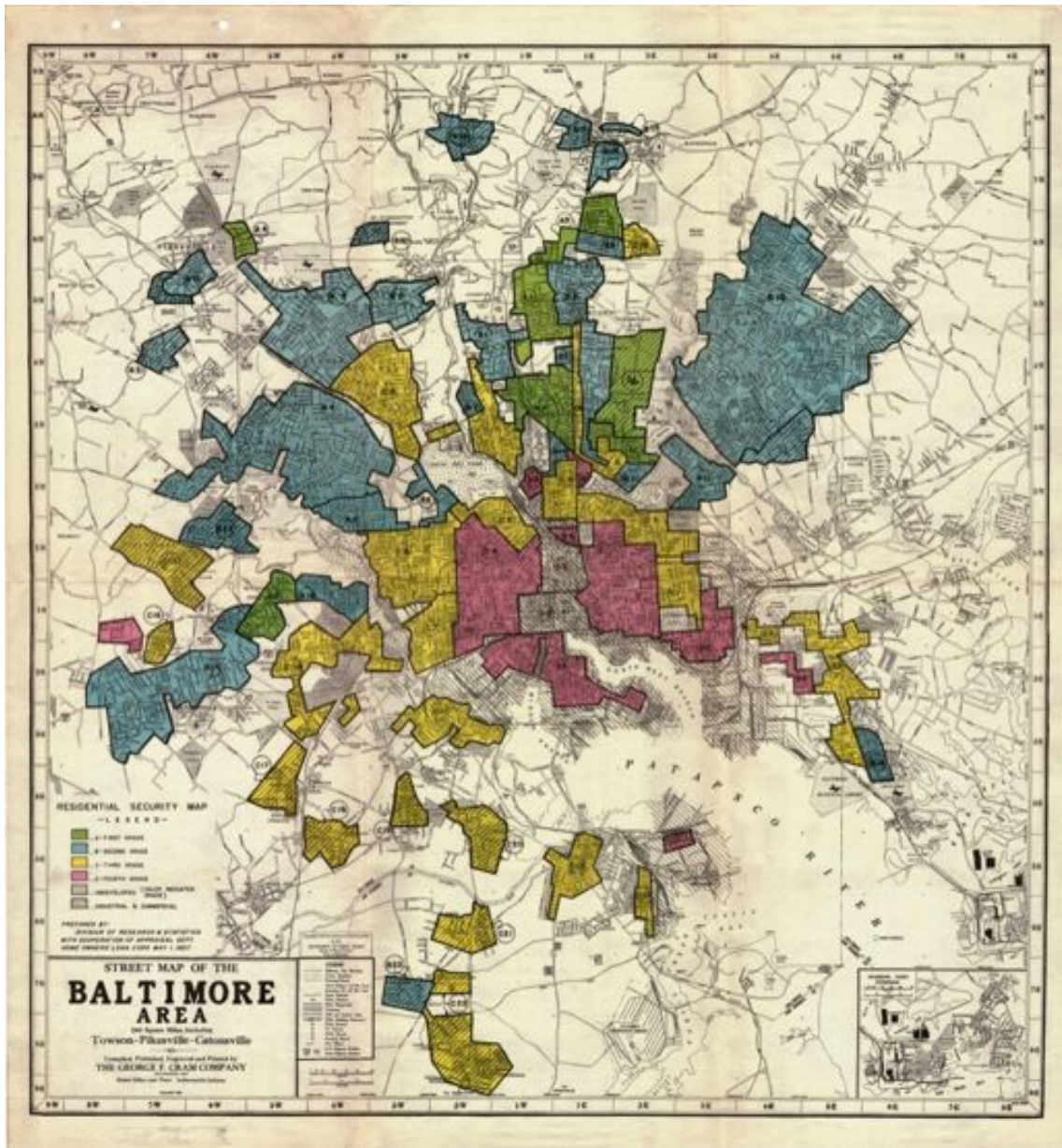


Figure 1: *HOLC Redline of Baltimore*

The other data set I use for my outcome variable is the recently published Opportunity Atlas created by economists at Harvard and Brown in consultation with the Census Bureau. The Opportunity Atlas is an interactive mapping tool that uses the anonymized data of over 20 million Americans to estimate for children of that district their projected future earnings, incarceration rates, and other outcomes based on their neighborhoods. The atlas divides the country by census tracts and compiles the data for all 70,000 tracts in the United States. The data has the ability to control for a variety of factors including race, parental wealth, and gender (Chetty et al., 2018). This work represents arguably the most concerted effort ever to study the relationship between geographic place and economic opportunity. Given that this tool was released in October of 2018, there is no known published work using this tool, making the current study one of the first to use it for an empirical analysis.

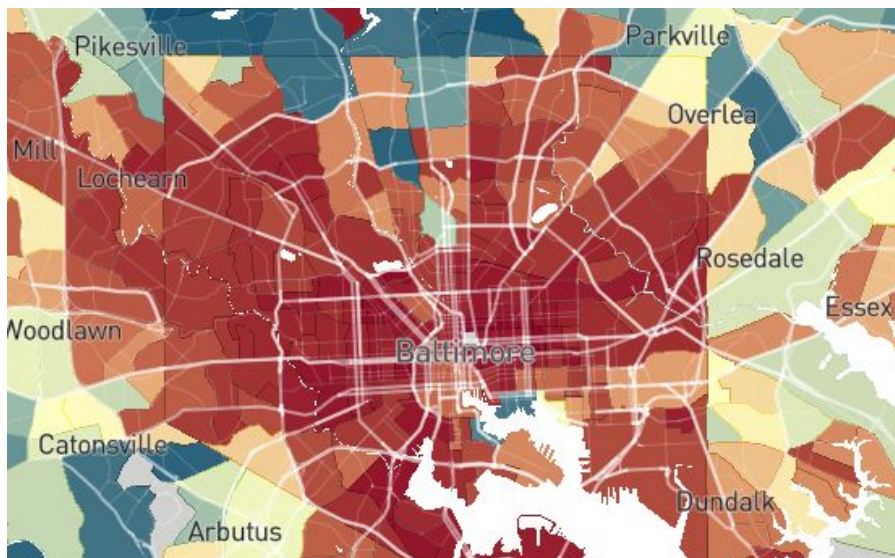


Figure 2: Baltimore Opportunity Atlas Map

My next task was finding a way to integrate the two sets of maps for empirical analysis. Using ArcGIS geographic analysis software I was able to superimpose the redline districts onto the Opportunity Atlas census tracts. This allowed me to see clearly the expected income and incarceration rates for those born into different redline districts. Census tracts in urban areas tend to be much smaller than the HOLC redline districts, so multiple census tracts fit into one HOLC district. In ArcGIS, I am able to mark a tract's distance from the HOLC map redline borders. This distance is critical to my regression discontinuity design—a method for determining an empirically causal relationship between two data sets. From the combination of the two maps, I then make a data set which includes (1) every tract's redline district, (2) the distance of the tract from an HOLC border, (3) the type of HOLC district that the tract borders, and (4) the average income and incarceration rates for the tract. I am then able to look at the original HOLC maps to see which color the outlined boundary corresponds to. On the Opportunity Maps, more reddish colors represent worse outcomes (i.e., lower income, higher incarceration rates), and bluer colors represent better outcomes. By scrolling over the census tracts on any given Opportunity Map, one can see the exact numerical outcomes for the tract. For a more detailed explanation of how I was able to use ArcGIS to combine the two maps please see Appendix, Section 1. Image 3 shows the final product of my work combining the two maps.

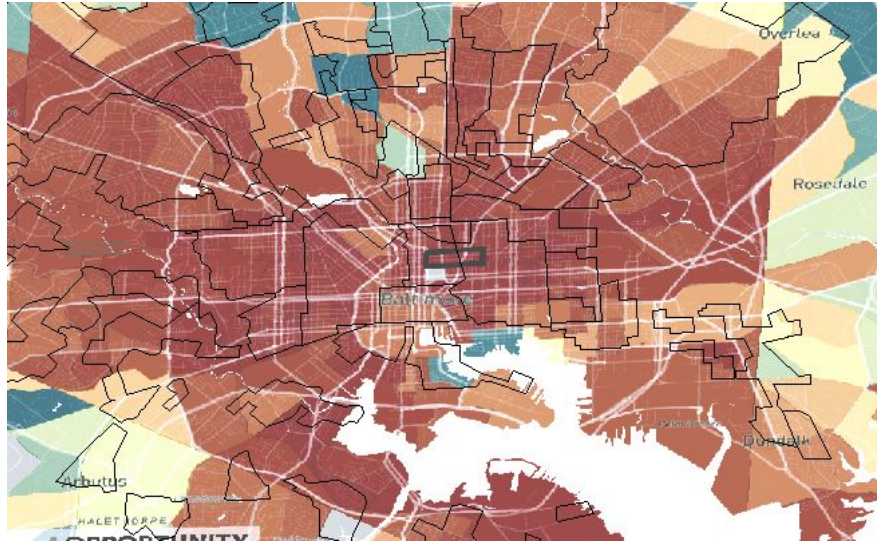


Figure 3: *Baltimore Opportunity Atlas Map with HOLC district overlay*

My geographic analysis also has significant implications for understanding *The Wire*. If one takes even a brief look at the residential security maps of Baltimore they see two large red blocks in the middle of the city. These red areas correspond directly with dark red areas in the center of the opportunity atlas indicating the low income and high incarceration rates of the area. Accordingly, redlining can be seen as providing the geographic backdrop for *The Wire*. These blocks are the primary sites of street activity and territorial negotiation in *The Wire*. The block on the left represents West Baltimore and the territory first controlled by Avon Barksdale and then by Marlo Stanfield. The block on the right represents East Baltimore and the territory primarily controlled by Proposition Joe. (See Appendix for a complete list of characters.)

Without redlining, this backdrop for the show does not exist. The drug trade would not be cleanly divided along East and West. It would not be as concentrated in the African American communities of the city, either. The divide between East and West is strongly ingrained throughout the show. When Old Face Andre incurs Marlo's wrath in Season Four, he goes to

Eastside drug lord Prop Joe for help. Prop Joe's response perfectly embodies the cultural gap between East and West, saying, "So, now you come over East Side and expect me to hide you. Why does every Baltimore nigger think that running away means crossing downtown?" (S4 E8) The divide is so great that crossing a few blocks into East Baltimore means entering a new city, life, and culture.

Correlation Between Geography and Life Outcomes for Earnings and Incarceration

If the biggest game for the residents of East and West Baltimore is making money from the drug trade, then the main mechanism for defeat, short of death, is incarceration. This dynamic between dealing and staying ahead of the law is one of the key rhythms of the show. While the drug trades high-stakes capitalist game is intensely criminalized, all the institutions of Baltimore play their own dimension of the same, highly synchronized game, one that is detrimental to broader goals of general societal improvement. The police officers "juke" the stats, doing virtually anything for a "clearance" on a murder or to make a felony turn into a misdemeanor, so "majors can become colonels, and colonels can make commissioner"; the politicians' strategy is ultimately about attracting votes, even if it means externalizing the costs of this process onto the citizens of the city; and the downtown developers rub elbows with politicians to receive public dollars they do not legitimately deserve. It's all in the game. As the drug dealer Fruit succinctly says when the Western District Commander Bunny Colvin shifts away from the typical war on drug strategy, "Look we grind and y'all try to stop it. That's how we do. Why you gotta go and fuck with the program?" (S3 E4). Despite Fruit's buying into the

criminalizing logic of the war on drugs, this multi-dimensional game is not in the best interest of the residents of East and West Baltimore. They are nonetheless confined within the fences of their harsh economic reality that ultimately will lead too many of them into an actual penitentiary.

My summary statistics help explain this Dickensian trajectory. As can be seen from Table 1a below, annual income is clearly lower, and incarceration rates are clearly higher, in lower-graded HOLC districts. Table 1a shows the summary statistics by redline district grade in Baltimore. Baltimore's median projected income across all districts for children born into low income families is \$31,890. However, it is much lower for those born into districts that were historically considered red or yellow by the HOLC. Those born into districts that were graded red in the past are expected to only make \$22,640, and those who are currently born into districts that were graded as yellow by the HOLC are expected to make only \$26,630. In contrast, those who are currently born into districts that were historically deemed blue or green by the HOLC are expected to make \$37,560 and \$42,030 respectively. These results show that contemporary income is still directly correlated with historical redline grades.

Incarceration rates follow a similar pattern. Those born into historically lower graded areas are more likely to be incarcerated. While the mean incarceration rate across all districts is 3.31%, 6.26% of those born into historically red districts are expected to be incarcerated and 3.61% of those born into yellow districts can expect to be incarcerated. Conversely, only 2.04% of individuals born into blue districts are expected to be incarcerated and only 1.54% of those born into green districts are expected to be incarcerated.

Table 1a
Baltimore Summary Statistics

Baltimore District (# Observations)	Income			Incarceration Rate		
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum/ Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum/ Maximum
All Districts (284)	31.89	10.43	16/69	3.31	2.31	.7/13
Red Districts (58)	22.64	3.99	16/43	6.26	2.49	1.2/13
Yellow Districts (85)	26.63	6.07	19/49	3.61	1.48	.7/9.4
Blue Districts (107)	37.56	8.97	20/69	2.04	1.18	.7/5.9
Green Districts (34)	42.03	10.20	23/62	1.54	1.00	1/5.1

The summary statistics presented in Table 1a indicate a clear relationship of neighborhood characteristics to HOLC boundaries. Confirming this, I ran an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression showing the correlation between redlining boundaries and my desired outcome variables in Baltimore.²

Table 1b
OLS Regression for Baltimore

	Income	Incarceration Rate
District Grade	7.48	-1.70

² In this regression, I assign my independent variable, *districtgrade*, a 1 if the district is red, a 2 if the district is yellow, a 3 if the district is blue, and a 4 if the district is green. I use my *income* and *incarceration* variables as my dependent variables.

These OLS regressions, as shown in Table 1b, reveal a strong and statistically significant correlation between HOLC district grades and both income and incarceration. Each HOLC district jump (a move from a lower to a higher district) represents a \$7,480 jump in annual projected income for Baltimore. Furthermore, each district jump in Baltimore represents a decrease of 1.7% in expected incarceration rates for children born in that district. Although important, this empirical strategy fails to prove causation and only indicates correlation, so further empirical tests are needed.

The correlation between redlining and outcome indicate that geography is destiny. Table 1a shows those born into areas that were deemed red are more than four times more likely to be incarcerated than those born into green areas. In addition, they can expect, on average, to make \$20,000 less per year compared to those born in green districts. *The Wire* also embodies and illustrates findings consistent with the conclusions of this work. It explores how few formal economic opportunities are available to the residents born in East and West Baltimore and shows that the drug trade has emerged as the primary industry to combat the lack of formal opportunity due to redlining. Given the illicit nature of the drug trade, this finding further explains why incarceration rates are higher in low-graded redline areas. Ultimately, this work helps to explain the problem recently identified by Stephanie M. Smith, Baltimore's Assistant Director of Equity, Engagement, and Communication, when she said the places where there is the most violence are the same that the city has historically neglected with its own public dollars. The high rises and the low rises are both centrally located in West Baltimore.

In Season One, the audience sees Bodie, Wallace, and Poot, three soldiers in the Barksdale drug organization, working in the low rises. The towers and low rises are located in

census tracts with expected annual incomes for children born there to be \$18,000 and \$19,000, respectively, and incarceration rates of these census tracts are 8.1% and 8.4%, respectively (Chetty et al., 2018). The expected income for these tracts is significantly lower than the surrounding areas. Given this, it is not surprising to see individuals born in these areas turn to the drug trade for a more lucrative economic opportunity. *The Wire* allows us to see these individuals not as irrational agents looking to create social chaos by rebelling against orderly systems, but rather as adolescents making a rational choice in response to the institutionally arranged circumstances of their lives.

Confronting the Causation Challenge

One does not have to dig deep into the archives of contemporary culture to uncover supremacist explanations of how our economic systems have been shaped along racial lines. Videos of people such as conservative commentator Ben Shapiro, recycling the arcane and empirically facile Moynihan report, frequently go viral (Shapiro, 2015). In an era when many white Americans look for simple answers to explain the profound racial injustices of our time, without reconciling their privileges to a supremacist history, this can be expected. While the previous section of this chapter has shown strong correlation between redlining and life outcomes, it did not show a causal relationship. Proving empirical causation is not a simple task in economics, especially over a time period as extensive as the one I am examining here. It takes critical analysis to theoretically delineate and untangle how historical forces manifest themselves in contemporary society. In addition, proving causation requires an in-depth understanding of

empirical methodology. While this section argues for theoretical and empirical causality between historical policy and present economic outcomes, *The Wire* demonstrates it artistically.

The book *The Wire, Race, Class and Genre*, edited by Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro, suggests that the show forces its viewers to empathize and understand the dynamics of the lives of the characters who were born into the inner city of Baltimore. Kennedy and Shapiro urge the viewers to think about Bubbles, Wallace, and Bodie when considering the fate of all non-violent drug offenders if they find themselves in the jurors' box, voting to acquit if possible. These intellectually sophisticated characters show themselves to adapt skillfully to their current environment. They act in a way deemed criminal by law, not because they lack cognitive, social, or moral capacity. Their behavior is a practical response to their positionality and circumstance.

There is sufficient evidence to claim a causal relationship between the life circumstances for characters in *The Wire* and America's history of redlining. Research shows that parental income is one of the primary drivers of the economic performance and expected income of their children (Saez & Zucman, 2016). This typically explains differences in earnings between offspring of higher and lower income families (Charles & Hurst, 2003). Critics could argue that factors other than redlining exogenously influence parental income and therefore do more to affect family wealth. This finding would severely compromise my empirical analysis. To address this concern, my dependent variable controls for parental income, so any discrepancies in parent income by neighborhood can be excluded as a cause of the correlation between historical redlining and anticipated income today.

Still, simply controlling for income alone is not sufficient to prove causation between redlining and present income based on neighborhood. To be useful, the analysis must also clearly

establish that (a) the effects of redlining continue to shape America's urban landscapes, and (b) redlining has a direct effect on the outcome variables being tested here. Fortunately, there has been a recent empirical examination of the effects of redlining that greatly bolster my argument. Aaronson et. al, have established that redlining still has a profound effect on the modern American city (2016). They state, "our results provide strongly suggestive evidence that the HOLC maps had a causal and lasting effect on the development of urban neighborhoods through credit access" (p. 1). The authors conclude that a lack of investment and credit access still exists in redlined communities today. This can be seen to be true in present day Baltimore where the average predominantly white community receives 87% more public investment than the average predominantly black community (Abello 2017). Importantly, Aaronson et al. also find that the lines the HOLC drew were not necessarily designed to identify pre-existing disparities in communities. Rather, the maps were designed to classify and discriminate against communities based on race. The maps, thus, excluded non-white communities from investment, credit access, insurance, affordable housing, and equitable education systems.

Economist Daniel Hartley argues that housing policy effects stretch over time because they create structures that tend to persist across generations (2017). Aaronson's data illuminates the effect of past policy on present outcomes in a society that often struggles to acknowledge the effects of racialized policy. Scholars have also established that credit access affects virtually every aspect of neighborhood life and development (Beck et al., 2009). Those studies concur with Aaronson et. al. that the effects of redlining have implications beyond housing, investment, and credit access that still persist to this day. This work, coupled with other recent literature

(Nickerson & Appel, 2016), clearly show that redlining still affects present institutional behavior.

Additional steps still need to be taken, however, to prove a *causal* relationship between redlining and present income. A recent report from the San Francisco Federal Reserve shows a clear relationship between community investment and income inequality (2011). As we are reaching virtually unprecedented levels of wage inequality, there is an increasingly stark divide between skilled and unskilled laborers. Children who come from neighborhoods lacking sufficient public and private investment are likely to attend inferiorly funded schools, have inferior infrastructure, inferior social services, as well as come from less wealthy families.

All of these factors hurt children's expected incomes as adults. Children who come from communities lacking public and private investment are less likely to attend college (Choi, 2011). There is an abundance of literature proving the value of a bachelor's degree in comparison to a high school diploma. Most notably, Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl find that bachelor's degree holders earn 84% more or \$2.8 million more over a lifetime than those who have only a high school degree (2010). Thus, evidence regarding the effect of neighborhood investment on college attendance is crucial to understanding the causal relationship between redlining and current income.

Understanding the pathway presented by the relevant literature is rather simple. Historians have established that redlining affected investment and credit access in redlined communities. Similarly, investment and credit availability have a direct impact on education levels and access to institutions which subsequently impact income.

Establishing a causal relationship with incarceration rates is similarly challenging. While there is ample evidence suggesting an inverse relationship between wealth and incarceration (Zaw et al., 2016), proof of a relationship between wealth and incarceration is insufficient for this study, given that my regressions control for family wealth. There is, however, increasing evidence that a lack of access to credit leads to increased incarceration rates and increased rates of recidivism (Aneja & Leon, 2017). Given that it has been established that a lack of credit access persists in redlined communities, it is not unreasonable to assume that this lack of credit is directly influencing higher incarceration rates. Furthermore, it has been noted there is a clear connection between local investment in a community and that community's education level. A lack of investment typically leads to lower levels of education. Research has also shown that lower levels of education lead to higher levels of incarceration (Tonry, 1999). Thus, we can establish a pathway that clearly demonstrates a causal relationship between redlining and incarceration.

Redlining still affects credit access and investment in communities, and it has been empirically demonstrated that a lack of credit access increases incarceration rates. The connection to investment is a little less succinct but still clear: a lack of investment leads to lower education levels which leads to an increase in incarceration rates. Economists have also asserted that an increase in investment in education would likely drive down incarceration rates (Smith, 2004).

Empirical Methods for Causal Analysis

My empirical framework uses elements of a regression discontinuity design (RDD) to exploit geographic boundaries to infer a causal impact of redlining on income and incarceration rates. This approach is similar to Nickerson and Appel (2016), who use a geographic regression discontinuity design to determine the effects of redlining on contemporary home prices in Boston. Regression discontinuity designs typically test the effect of a given treatment on the outcome variable and uses the outcome variables initial distance from the treatment to determine causality. Regression discontinuity designs rest on the assumption that neighboring regions on either side of a border should ultimately have differing outcomes if a causality is present despite their relative proximity.

In my regression design, I look at neighboring census tracts on either side of an HOLC redline boundary to examine the effects of the redlining on that area. In theory, if HOLC boundaries had no effect on the variables being tested, then neighboring census tracts on either side of an HOLC boundary should produce similar results. Given their close geographic proximity, there should not be significant natural variation between the tracts. Accordingly, any variation found between them should be the result of the HOLC boundary. Tracts that have greater geographic distance between them are likely to vary more naturally due to factors not being tested in my regression model. An RDD proves causation when it produces a sharp break or discontinuity in the data when crossing a treatment boundary. When an RDD does not show causation, the data should smoothly cross treatment boundaries. Please see appendix section two

for a more rigorous explanation of my empirical design as well as the regression model employed in this paper.

Empirical Results from Causal Analysis

I use the regression model included in the appendix (Equation 1), data from both the HOLC maps, and the Opportunity Atlas to empirically test the effects of redlining on both income and incarceration rates.

Table 2a
Redlining Effects on Income in Baltimore

	Polynomial Order			
	First	Second	Third	Fourth
<i>Dneg</i>	1.36 (2.37)	3.63 (3.26)	8.37 (6.43)	-22.78 (9.56)
<i>Dnegdist</i>	-.45 (.79)	2.83 (1.12)	11.11 (5.97)	-20.15 (12.09)
<i>Dnegdist²</i>	NA	.51 (.13)	3.28 (2.06)	-13.32 (5.71)
<i>Dnegdist³</i>	NA	NA	.25 (.19)	-3.12 (1.04)
<i>Dnegdist⁴</i>	NA	NA	NA	-.23 (.07)
<i>Dposdist</i>	.18 (.84)	-.96 (1.73)	-3.22 (4.53)	-27.51 (16.57)
<i>Dposdist²</i>	NA	.22 (.23)	1.12 (1.69)	15.56 (9.67)
<i>Dposdist³</i>	NA	NA	-.10 (.18)	-3.44 (2.13)
<i>Dposdist⁴</i>	NA	NA	NA	.26 (.16)

Observations=284; Sect. FE=43; Median 31.89

Table 2b
Redlining Effects on Incarceration Rates in Baltimore

	Polynomial Order			
	First	Second	Third	Fourth
<i>Dneg</i>	.61 (.41)	.60 (.766)	3.24 (1.72)	1.80 (3.57)
<i>Dnegdist</i>	.25 (.16)	.14 (.55)	2.94 (1.75)	-3.16 (3.43)
<i>Dnegdist²</i>	NA	-.02 (.06)	.92 (.51)	-2.32 (1.64)
<i>Dnegdist³</i>	NA	NA	.08 (.04)	-.57 (.31)
<i>Dnegdist⁴</i>	NA	NA	NA	-.04 (.02)
<i>Dposdist</i>	-.10 (.08)	.01 (.25)	.80 (1.09)	4.75 (4.62)
<i>Dposdist²</i>	NA	-.21 (.04)	-.34 (.40)	-2.69 (2.54)
<i>Dposdist³</i>	NA	NA	.04 (.04)	.58 (.55)
<i>Dposdist⁴</i>	NA	NA	NA	-.04 (.04)

Observations=284; Sect. FE=43; Median=3.31

The identification strategy I employed was not a perfect fit for the data, with only the fourth order polynomial generating statistical significance with regards to redlining and income. Nevertheless, the fourth order polynomial represents a novel finding in the context of redlining and its empirical effects on economic opportunity. Table 2a shows that children born into a home on a lower-graded side of an HOLC border in Baltimore are expected to make a minimum of \$2,000 less a year. This statistically significant result is true even if that child's home is touching the border of a higher graded district. The expected income discrepancy only increases for children born deeper into a lower graded district, with redlining accounting for up to a \$22,000 per year disadvantage in annual projected income.

The theoretical and empirical relationship between redlining and incarceration is weaker than the relationship between redlining and income. However, a third order polynomial transformation showed a statistically significant relationship between redlining and incarceration, with those born into lower-graded districts being more likely to be incarcerated. This third order polynomial showed a .74% difference in percentage value between two census tracts on either side of an HOLC border. The .74% difference means that a child born in a census tract adjacent to an HOLC border but on the lower graded side is actually over 11% more likely to be incarcerated in their lifetime than a child born in an adjacent tract on the other side of the border.

The Wire works to show how much the relatively small geographic differences and the arbitrary chances that come with them matter in life outcomes. Namond, the son of an imprisoned Barksdale lieutenant, achieves legitimate success while his friend, Dukie, just as capable, ends up a drug addict. Stringer Bell never becomes the businessman he aspires to be despite his intelligence. As Avon Barksdale says to him, “They [the downtown suits] saw your ghetto ass coming from miles away” (S3 E11). Cutty can only find legitimate employment once he ships out to suburbs beyond the poorer neighborhoods of Baltimore, suburbs built on and benefitting from the disadvantage of his own inner-city district. Bubbs smartly knows the numbers and tries entrepreneurship with “Bubbles’ Depot,” but his informal, shopping-cart business fails, as he is repeatedly robbed due to lack of protection from the police or any other Baltimore agency. He only escapes from this circumstance once he gets formal employment based on a conventionally advertised job in the newspaper, but his escape still amounts to a poverty wage in the range of the \$18,000 per annum earned from the legitimate employment in the ghetto. Bubbles and Cutty both find personal fulfillment beyond the street by volunteering,

Bubbles in a soup kitchen each afternoon once he is done with his shift selling the morning newspaper and Cutty coaching “corner” kids in boxing after his daytime works as a low-wage gardener.

They each remain economically disadvantaged despite being intelligent, hardworking, community-oriented individuals who would likely find mainstream economic success if they were raised in an area not intentionally starved of economic opportunity by the federal government. Bodie Broadus is another sharp, hard-working young man who frequently finds himself navigating legal trouble due to the nature of his profession. In Season One, he gets released from juvenile detention by a judge due to his seeming commitment to be an upstanding citizen of West Baltimore. After the detectives Herc and Carver, furious with him for “escaping” incarceration, punch him in the face (ironically, the same crime Bodie was accused of committing), Bodie pleads his case, saying, “He [the judge] saw my potential. He expects big things from me...college, law school, medical school, all that good shit” (S1 E6). Bodie is dead three seasons later. This is the tragedy of redlining, economic subjugation, and capitalism in the post-industrial American city.

Conclusion

If Bodie Broadus was born into a zip code that mattered to those in control of the political and economic systems of America, it is reasonable to imagine he might, indeed, have a career as a scholar, doctor, lawyer, or similar professional, but he was not. Ultimately, even the most competent individuals, able to navigate and survive the cruellest of circumstances, are swept aside by the consequences of generations of economic oppression. One of the most concrete,

calculated, and condemnable policy moves ever made came in the form of the HOLC residential security mapping and the FHC relegation of African Americans to inside the boundaries of its lowest-grade districts.

For a people barely a half-century out of forced slavery, this policy amounted to an economic blow further establishing institutions of oppression that only the very luckiest managed to escape. Fate is always fickle, and *The Wire* gives its audience a taste of what might happen when, despite their tribulations, people like Cutty and Bubbles find enough of a break to manage to get a foot up. But, mostly, the forces of fate are aligned squarely against the residents of East and West Baltimore. The FHLBB and HOLC decided much of this early in the 20th century, when Bodie's great-grandmother and Avon's grandfather still were hearing tales from their parents about what it was like in the days of slavery.

In the next chapter, we will look more deeply at the residences, the actual physical homes of several of the HOLC districts as represented in *The Wire*, gleaning from their placement, their material qualities, and their symbolic meaning more about the economic reality, subjugation, and consequent decisions made by rational actors born into a world shaped by historical dynamics that persist in their effects to this day.

Chapter 2: Structural Differences: Housing and Class Stratification In *The Wire*

"If it ain't in the west side, I don't know it, yo."-Wallace

Wealth, Housing, and the New Deal

Although it has been the subject of increasing debate in recent years, most economists still take as established that home ownership is the primary driver of wealth accumulation in America (Florida, 2018). Furthermore, researchers have recently shown that purchasing a home is still a valuable investment for the long-term building of wealth (Herbert et al., 2013).

“Long-term” applies to more than one’s own life; home ownership is also a fundamental driver for familial intergenerational wealth and, thus, is a critical factor in racial wealth disparities (Boehm & Schlottmann, 2002). At age 32, the average black American is worth \$63,000 and the average white American is worth \$210,000. This discrepancy is significant but stays relatively constant throughout the remainder of individuals’ 30’s and the first half their 40’s. However, at about age 45 the gap starts to increase. By age 64, black Americans are worth \$250,000 and white Americans are worth \$1.3 million (Urban Institute, 2016). There is little change in this gap from 64 onwards. Age 45 is approximately when children begin to inherit their parents’ estates, with home value consistently accounting for a significant portion of these inheritances. Accordingly, scholars believe home ownership continues to be an engine of wealth inequality (McKeran et al., 2016).

Although lack of property ownership by black Americans extends back to the unfulfilled post civil-war promise of 40 acres and a mule, The New Deal represented a pivotal point in

cementing this legacy of exclusion. Shortages in affordable housing existed for both whites and blacks alike in the early part of the 20th century, especially immediately following the Great Depression. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt recognized this problem and worked to correct it (Von Hoffman, 2012). He saw the unique opportunity to simultaneously stimulate the manufacturing sector and provide affordable housing for lower- and middle-class families (Ferguson, 1984). This fiscal stimulation, coupled with HOLC loans and FHA backed mortgages, allowed many families to buy homes from the late 1930's through the 1950s. Many scholars have argued this policy was the principle driver in the creation of the 20th century's middle class. Unsurprisingly, African Americans were largely excluded from this process. In order to pass much of his legislation, FDR had to compromise with Southern Democrats who made continuing and increasing segregation a priority (Rothstein, 2017). Affordable public housing represented a critical dimension of FDR's New Deal policy. However, due to the pervasive nature of racism in the social and political structures of the time, public housing became a profoundly segregating force, both geographically and economically.

The domestic economy during World War II forced great shifts in the nation's demographic distribution as workers flocked to wartime manufacturing hubs, desperate to secure living wages on the heels of the greatest economic catastrophe in American history. Even in areas that were not previously populated or segregated, contractors, working in accord with federal housing guidelines, built separate white and black housing units (i.e., Richmond, CA) (Rothstein, 2017). Federal guidelines intended that publicly funded housing would be a desirable option for both white and black Americans, alike (although public housing built for black Americans was typically lower quality and had worse upkeep). As mass-produced suburban

tracts such as Levittowns began shaping the post World-War II housing landscape, white Americans began buying homes in suburbs using FHA-insured loans. These affordable homes became valuable investments and significant drivers of wealth during the post-war economic boom. Levittowns, however, excluded African Americans.

Private housing markets, for the most part, also excluded African Americans as well. As the century progressed, however, realtors began to realize quick profits by selling to blacks using predatory selling techniques. Realtors and developers typically would offer to buy from a white family for above-market price and then sell that home to a black family for a reasonable price. They would then use this black family as evidence of the “deterioration of the neighborhood” and get other white families to sell for below market value. These predators would buy those homes at below market rates and subsequently sell to black Americans at an exorbitant markup under the terms of an oppressive mortgage or housing contract (Coates, 2014). In essence, black Americans had two options for housing in metropolitan areas for most the twentieth century: live in public housing that deteriorated in quality as the century progressed, or overpay for a home under discriminatory conditions. Baltimore, and Maryland more generally, epitomized these ruthless economic conditions. Of the six mass-produced Levittown tract cities built in the U.S, half of them were built in Maryland (Rothstein, 2017).

Realtors also engaged shamelessly in blockbusting—the practice of stoking racial fear in order to buy homes from whites fleeing the neighborhood, then selling the properties at inflated prices to blacks. One study found that in the Baltimore neighborhoods north of Edmondson Avenue, the average white homeowner sold their homes for \$7,320 and these homes were immediately sold to black families with no renovations for an average price of \$12,387 (SEIU,

2004). In David Simons 1997 book, *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*, he stated these neighborhoods frequently shifted from entirely white to entirely black in less than a year. These neighborhoods provide many of the geographic sites of territorial negotiation among rival drug organizations in *The Wire*.

Public housing also has an egregious history in Baltimore. Between 1937 and 1943, the federal government and the city of Baltimore erected seven segregated public housing units within city limits. At a time when there were few laws prohibiting overtly racist policies, the federal government said of the development, “Not slum clearance, but rather using the projects to block the Negro from encroaching upon white territory” (Gladoria, 2006). Despite this rhetoric, by 1950 the Baltimore city council admitted they were only going to build African American public housing developments in inner-city “slum clearance” areas. The lone exception to this rule was the Cherry Hill development, which the city built on vacant land between an incinerator and the municipal landfill (Samuels, 2008). The developments for black residents included three high-rise public housing projects. Each high-rise development went up next to an already existing low-rise project, further condensing the city’s African American populations in the inner city “red” districts.

Public Housing in The Wire

Public housing in Season One represents the economic epicenter of the informal “street” economy in *The Wire*. Avon Barksdale, president of the Barksdale organization, controls the high-rise Franklin Terrace and “The Pit,” the adjacent low-rise development. These areas represent the most profitable drug real estate in the city, the headquarters of West Baltimore's

largest industry. When Baltimore officials first built this development, however, they deemed it some of the city's least valuable real estate. The Pit is located in Baltimore's McCulloh Homes, the city's first African American public housing development. According to the Maryland ACLU, city officials said of the development that the McCulloh homes "offer a splendid barrier against the encroachment of colored" into Bolton Hill, "a good white residential neighborhood" (Samuels, 2008). The McCulloh Homes are located in the northern part of West Baltimore's large red district (*district D4, Image 1*). Bolton Hill is just North of the McCulloh homes in a yellow graded district (*district C5, Image 1*). According to HOLC documents, Bolton Hill would have received a higher score if not for "Negro encroachment."

Lexington Terrace served as the model for *The Wire's* Franklin Terrace, located in the heart of West Baltimore's red district (*district D4, Image 1*), located between Lexington and Saratoga streets. Built in 1959, Lexington Terrace was one of the city's three major high-rise developments designed to "clear slums" and provide housing for the 25,000 African Americans in Baltimore who were displaced by urban renewal between 1950 and 1964 (Glaroria, 2006). Centrally located in a densely populated economic wasteland and devoid of investment, credit access, or traditional economic opportunity, Lexington Terrace provided optimal conditions for the drug trade to flourish. More than anything else, it was the actions of federal, state, and municipal officials that led to the proliferation of narcotics trafficking. After securing \$22.7 million in federal aid for an \$86 million-reconstruction of the area, Baltimore's first African American mayor, Kurt Schmoke, decided Lexington Terrace had run its course. He walked through it in 1993, listening to never-ending complaints from the tenants. Vacancies, crime, structural damage, and poverty plagued the building. According to the Baltimore Sun, the

majority of its tenants were single mothers living on less than \$6,000 a year (1995). Schmoke said at its demolition that his intent was to “tear down a project and build up a community” (Daemmrich, 19).

At the beginning of Season Three, *The Wire* depicts the social and political dynamics at play during the demolition of Franklin Terrace. Mayor Clarence Royce (a character loosely based on Schmoke) exclaims to an emotional but supportive crowd, “A few moments from now, the Franklin Terrace Towers behind me, which, sadly, came to represent some of this city's most entrenched problems, will be gone” (S3, E1). The irony behind these comments is that Franklin Terrace had always represented the most entrenched problems of Baltimore, and, by extension, those of America, but not by fault of its residents. Rather, the Terrace represented some of the worst results achieved by American policy-makers. The short-sighted, discriminatory actions to protect property value for white private home owners by crowding black Americans into desolate housing stands as one of America’s “most entrenched problems.” It is a problem created by social mechanisms for maintaining the status-quo of white supremacy and wealth. Public agencies built the projects on racist ideology.

The political theater of Clarence Royce, Baltimore’s king-maker in the *The Wire*, is beautifully juxtaposed with a dialogue between Bodie and Poot, both shown dealing drugs in The Pit and the high rises since the beginning of Season One. Walking together to the demolition event, Poot expresses his sadness about the loss of the Towers. Bodie reminds him, rather gently, that he is getting sad over a mere building. Poot responds that he is not sad about the building, but the memories and the people there. Despite the Towers’ problems, they were home to him. The ever-astute Bodie responds, saying, “They gonna tear this building down. They gonna build

new shit. But people? They don't give a fuck about people.” Clarence Royce immediately proves Bodie right as he proudly declares from his podium, “You are very soon going to see low and moderately priced houses built in their place.” He makes no mention of the “people” displaced by the demolition or what they mean to the city of Baltimore. Rather, as Bodie predicted, those in charge care about the physical structures and their monetary value. When Poot once again expresses his “homeless” feeling, Bodie shifts the conversation to redirect Poot’s sadness, perfectly summarizing the economic significance of the Tower by saying:

You just damn near out of work is all. All over the city, even out in the county, you had people, coke or dope, 24/7. Where was it they go? Man, look, you live in the projects, you ain't shit. But you sling product there? You got the game by the ass, man. Now these downtown suit-wearing-ass bitches snatched the best territory in the city from y'all. You wanna cry over some shit, cry over that.

Bodie once again shows an uncanny knowledge of the political and economic systems of West Baltimore. He understands that, ultimately, the city prioritizes real estate development over citizens and, more importantly, he understands the cultural and economic significance of the towers. Franklin Terrace represented the headquarters of what is likely West Baltimore's largest industry. He also recognizes how much the rest of the populace devalued the lives of those who resided in the towers. Living in the towers meant being a marginalized people disregarded by the institutions of Baltimore or, as Bodie puts it more directly, “You ain’t shit.” Despite this, the towers literally were the structures that lent Bodie and Poot clout: cultural respect, personal power, and lucrative employment. The scene closes with the crowd taking in the spectacle of the demolition as clouds of smoke and dust cover the surrounding area. It serves as a reminder of the continual displacement of a traumatized and diasporic people.

Government agencies set up public housing in Baltimore to fail. Although subsidized housing is not an inherently flawed idea, government housing architected in supremacist ideology, designed to segregate, oppress, and isolate an already marginalized community is truly horrific. With redlining, slum clearance, and densely located public housing, the government created the conditions for drug trafficking to take root. Once these conditions were actualized, city officials proceeded to tear down the product of its own investment. Still, the towers highlight that adaptive and resourceful individuals can turn even the most ill-intentioned government investment into the basis for revenue, in this case the citizens of West Baltimore.

Private Black Homeownership and the Black Middle Class

In addition to providing a window into the effects of public housing policies, *The Wire* also aids the viewer's understanding of discrimination against black Americans in the private housing market. Just as the dust and smoke from the demolition of the towers permeates the surrounding areas, the drug trade expands throughout West Baltimore as the loss of their prime territory forces the Barksdale organization dealers to negotiate with the existing crews for new territory nearby. The collateral damage to residents of the area's neighborhoods consequently rises to a new and increasingly tragic level. Western District Major Bunny Colvin recognizes that the "street rip" and "bust heads" policies of the war on drugs will be insufficient for combatting this problem. He decides to create "legal" drug zones (where police turn a blind eye to dealing) in desolate, vacated neighborhoods to ease the detrimental effects of drug dealing in the occupied residential neighborhoods. While Major Colvin establishes three such zones, the zone called "Hamsterdam" by the younger dealers (an ambiguously incorrect pronunciation of Amsterdam,

where the sale of some street drugs is legal) is the largest and most prominently featured drug zone on the show. Hamsterdam is located on Vincent Street in district D4, between Fayette and Lexington street.

After establishing this zone, however, Major Colvin realizes he must relocate an elderly woman who still lives in a Vincent Street home. Representative of others of her generation who lived in the area, she tells him, “My husband worked for Mr. Cooper at the American Can. He made good money. We saved up and bought this house. There were white families still living in the neighborhood then” (S3, E6). The neighborhood she lives in is one neighborhood north of Edmondson Avenue in West Baltimore, where blockbusting real estate agents exploited potential black homeowners, overcharging them for homes while using fear to drive white families into the suburbs. The dynamic was so powerful that these neighborhoods could flip from entirely white to entirely black in less than a year (Simon, 1997). This episode calls the viewer’s attention to the particulars of the historical reality: Although demographic transitions made brief periods of neighborhood integration inevitable, realtors did everything in their power to encourage white flight and exploit black homeowners.

Because Vincent Street sits in a red district, even residents who owned homes there were typically unable to receive access to credit for any investment or business purpose. Moreover, their neighborhood schools and facilities received very little funding and investment over the many decades since implementation of the HOLC policy. As a result, wealthier black families moved to the suburbs, while many poorer ones experienced foreclosure due to the elevated cost of the homes and the oppressive nature of the housing contracts black Americans were forced to sign (SEIU, 2008). Others among the remaining residents left the neighborhood for more

populated areas in the city. Thus, urban residential black neighborhoods collapsed under the weight of redlining and municipal housing policy that left black homeowners with virtually valueless homes. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the average black American bought these homes for around \$12,500 in the 1950's and 60's. Currently, vacant land on and near Vincent Street is valued at \$20,000 to \$25,000 per lot, a shocking depreciation in terms of real dollars (Zillow, 2019).

The decline in urban industrial jobs also contributed significantly to vacancies in working class black neighborhoods. The elderly woman Major Colvin encounters mentions that her husband worked at "the American Can." At the start of the twentieth century, Baltimore was home to the largest can manufacturer in the country. The American Can Company anchored this Baltimore industry. It consistently employed about 800 of the city's residents, both white and black, throughout most of the century. However, the industry began to decline in the late 1960's and 1970's. By the late 1980's the American Can Company merged with other can manufactures, leaving their Baltimore factory vacated and laying off all their employees (Baltimore Heritage, 2004).

In establishing Hamsterdam, what Major Colvin effectively does is create a "red district" in an already redlined area. He recognizes that West Baltimore's drug trade is a problem that cannot be solved, only contained. He identifies the most desolate areas of West Baltimore and forces the dealers and fiends into them in an effort to preserve the lives and property values of the majority of West Baltimore's residents. This strategy, notably, carries parallels to redlining; the HOLC viewed black migration to urban areas as a problem and tried to restrict it in order to contain African Americans within certain districts and types of properties. Particularly

interesting is that the neighborhood Major Colvin selects as the least desirable in West Baltimore at one point served middle-class blacks. Black homeowners in urban communities, such as the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood discussed earlier in this paper, have confronted the same types of difficulties, degradation, and loss that *The Wire* depicts on Vincent Street. As crime rates elevated, industrial jobs declined, and investment in the area evaporated the once middle-class neighborhoods experienced increasing vacancies. In summary, for many working-class black Americans, home ownership did not bring the same wealth and status it brought white Americans. African Americans were often forced to buy homes in areas deemed “least desirable” by the federal government at inflated prices and under restrictive terms—all the consequence of redlining.

Some black Americans did achieve middle-class status through the mechanism of home ownership. *The Wire* depicts several middle-class black families who presumably own the houses where they are shown dining, loving, conversing with partners, and so forth. Bunny Colvin, Cedric Daniels, and Kima Greggs all enjoy a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. They also all earn reasonable wages, albeit as police officers, which is indicative of the narrow range of career options available to black Americans. When the audience sees Bunny Colvin seated on the stoop of a well maintained, quiet townhouse, they see a realistic representation of the types of integrated, predominantly black middle-class neighborhoods that exist along the outskirts of West Baltimore.

Throughout the scenes which show middle-class African Americans in their homes, the conversation frequently centers on money and finances. When the Deacon, a well-connected church figure involved in many community-building efforts in West Baltimore, approaches

Bunny to let him know the University of Maryland is interested in hiring him for a research project with violent juveniles, Bunny respectfully declines, stating that as a hotel security director he is “Pullin’ 52, good bennies, got a take-home car” (S3 E3). The image of Bunny in a bathrobe talking about his formidable salary while sipping coffee and reading the paper firmly frames him as a middle-class American. In addition to the \$52,000 a year Bunny is making from the hotel job, he also has a lieutenant’s pension, which is 60% of one’s working salary after 25 years of service. In 2015, Baltimore police lieutenants made between \$92,000 and \$105,000 annually (Baltimore Police Department, 2015). In 2006, salaries in nominal dollars would likely be a bit lower, but still it is not unreasonable to assume Bunny was making approximately \$90,000 a year with his two incomes. Notably, had he not instituted the Hamsterdam experiment, Bunny’s comfortable middle class salary would have been significantly higher. Bunny initially had a major’s salary (\$116,000 in 2015) and had been hired for a security job at Johns Hopkins that paid over \$80,000. However, because of his efforts to contain drug trafficking in restricted zones, he was relegated to a lieutenant’s pension and saw his Johns Hopkins offer rescinded.

Despite these setbacks, Bunny is able to maintain a middle-class life. However, not all Americans are as lucky. MIT economist Peter Temin identifies two distinct American classes: A predominantly white upper class that wields political and economic power and a “much larger, minority-heavy (but still mostly white) lower class that is all too frequently subject to the first group’s whims” (2017). For the latter group, Temin concludes that it takes 20 years with virtually no financial setbacks for them to escape poverty. For many black working class Baltimoreans looking to escape poverty, any mistake, run of bad luck, or difficult life circumstance could lead them back to square one.

With this in mind, it is clear why black couples place particular emphasis on career matters during their domestic conversations in *The Wire*. Achieving and maintaining middle-class status is a constant battle for black families, and one that must be error-free. Overcoming institutional barriers to success takes constant attention, both to the process of achievement and the avoidance of missteps. Cedric and Marla Daniels have a lovely home and lifestyle, reflective of their education and well-paying jobs. Despite the care and intelligence they reveal as characters, career objectives ruin their home life. After Marla pressures Cedric to leave the police force and put his law degree into practice, Cedric responds, stating he has no intention of leaving the force. “You know what I love?” he offers rhetorically, then answers, “The mind that's always a step ahead of me. The person who never stops thinking it through. That's what I fell in love with first.” Unimpressed, Marla retorts, “You know what I fell in love with first? Do you? Your ambition. Where did that man go?”

This interaction sums up Marla and Cedric's relationship, one that ultimately ends in separation in Season Three. They live in a constant tension of how to find the next foothold for their upward economic mobility. This ongoing pressure helps illuminate the dynamics that had caused Daniels previously to engage in illegal behavior to pad his officer's salary when he first joined the force. In the third episode of the series, FBI agent Fitzhugh tells BPD detective Jimmy McNulty that Cedric Daniels is a “dirty” cop. Fitzhugh shares that a two-month FBI asset investigation concluded that “[Daniels] has a couple hundred thousand more in liquid assets than any police lieutenant should ever have.” Later, the show reveals that department investigations found Daniels had skimmed cash from seized drug money. Yet this information stands in contrast to the series' extended characterization of Cedric Daniels, whom the series depicts as a

noble and moral man who cares deeply about improving the quality of police work in Baltimore. Accordingly, Daniels' willingness to steal drug money accentuates the power of capitalist forces and contributes to our understanding of what drives criminal behavior. Middle-class status only results from constant struggle for black families and, even for the most moral men, the pursuit of such status can nudge them towards criminal behavior.

The domestic life of detective Kima Greggs with her partner, Cheryl, is shown to have interpersonal dynamics similar to those of Daniels. While not quite as fancy as the Daniels' home, Cheryl and Kima live in a comfortable middle-class condominium. Cheryl, however, is unhappy with Kima's work as a police officer, largely because of its inherent physical danger, and wants her to pursue a safer and more lucrative career. Kima starts studying law; however, like Daniels, her heart is with the police force. Both are committed to making neighborhoods safer—and to the excitement of the chase. After Kima almost starts an altercation with a drunk and disorderly college student, Cheryl scolds her, "You got to start thinking, what would a lawyer do? What would a lawyer say? Shakima Greggs, Esquire." Kima ignores her partner's pleas in tackling the man and arresting him. As with the Daniels, their home life is fraught with tension regarding Kima's career.

In Season Two, issues with their domestic relationships and careers come to a head when, instead of leaving the force, both officers recommit themselves to it. After Daniels is asked to lead the major crimes unit, he attempts to recruit Kima. When Kima declines, citing domestic reasons, Daniels responds, "Think my woman's gonna give a great big cheer when she hears about it? I was out the damn door." Kima says, "You don't know Cheryl." Daniels retorts, "You don't know Marla." Both officers end up deferring their legal careers and decide to join the unit.

Both relationships subsequently end in separation. By the end of Season Three, Cheryl marries a lawyer, and Marla is elected to city council.

Despite being comfortable middle-class homeowners, Marla and Cheryl are unwittingly trying to join what an article in *The Atlantic* recently dubbed the “new aristocracy” (Stewart, 2018). This new aristocracy, or 9.9%, identifies as middle class but is not as conspicuous in their consumption habits and lifestyle choices as the “country club aristocracy” of the twentieth century. While identifying as middle class, this new aristocracy simultaneously “throws down roadblocks behind [them]” to prevent the other 90% from joining. Marriage partners now sort themselves by education more than they have since the 1920’s. Educated and wealthy couples exclude 90 percenters from their circle of friends and acquaintances, keeping their social capital within their own group. Speaking to a readership mostly composed of the 9.9%, the article asserts:

We 9.9 percenters live in safer neighborhoods, go to better schools, have shorter commutes, receive higher-quality health care, and, when circumstances require, serve time in better prisons. We also have more friends—the kind of friends who will introduce us to new clients or line up great internships for our kids.

It is understandable why Marla and Cheryl want to join this aristocracy. Being African American and attaining a berth in this new class can set up generations of wealth that otherwise would be elusive. However, joining this group is getting increasingly difficult. Intergenerational earnings elasticity (IGE) measures potential for economic mobility and deviation from parental earnings. In 1970 the IGE was less than 0.3; contemporarily it is 0.5 (Corak, 2012). This represents an increase of over 67% in IGE. Parental earnings in America dictate their children's future more than in any other developed country in the world (Stewart, 2018). Achieving middle-class status

in itself brings benefits, but in order to achieve long-term wealth, black Americans, like their white counterparts, need to join the 9.9%. Cheryl and Marla embody middle class women battling for this position amid the difficulties associated with this fight.

White Home Ownership

While race has a profound effect on the structure of the American economy, it would be simplistic to argue that our economic classes are cleanly divided along racial lines. For example, despite being a white male, Jimmy McNulty's economic status runs parallel to Kima Greggs'. Property ownership, financial assets, and even social class are fundamentally unimportant to these characters. This lack of financial ambition plays a role in both characters' separation from their partners; both eventually fall behind in child support as well. In contrast, Jimmy McNulty's ex-wife, Elena, is distinctly concerned with achieving the "new aristocratic" status. While he appears indifferent regarding his children's education, Elena diligently makes sure her children have access to the best private schooling and tutors in Baltimore. The allocation of resources towards children's academic and extracurricular activities to assure their competitive advantage concretely perpetuates class barriers and is a staple of the new aristocracy (Lareau, 2002). For the McNultys, their choices of residences also make evident the couple's difference in material values; Elena lives in a spacious suburban home while Jimmy lives in an unfurnished urban apartment.

Elena is able to maintain her new aristocratic status because of her ambition and apparent success as a real estate agent. In Season Two, she crosses paths with Nick Sobotka, a port worker struggling to maintain a legitimate income. After finding the drug trade more lucrative, Nick

thinks he is financially stable enough to own a home. However, he begins to see the barriers to upward mobility in America, illustrative of the ways the decline of industrial jobs, federal and local housing policy, and increasing class divides also hurt white Baltimoreans. While redlining disproportionately impacted non-white communities, many European immigrants and working-class white Americans also felt the detrimental effects of this policy. Nick Sobotka is of Polish descent and his family lives on the Baltimore peninsula. This peninsula was deemed red by the HOLC (district, d5), citing a “[N]egro presence, an infiltration of foreigners, and industrial encroachment.” The Sobotka's house is on Reynolds Street, which lies in the heart of Locust Point, a neighborhood occupied by industrial port workers. While properties in this neighborhood have appreciated over the decades, values generally have not kept up with the surrounding areas. Nick learns this lesson the hard way when he visits his late aunt's old house looking to purchase it. Jimmy McNulty's wife, Elena, is the seller's agent for the property and begins talking up the beautiful aspects of Federal Hill, ostensibly where the house is located. Nick states, “This ain't Federal Hill. This is the Point, Locust Point.” Elena responds, “As far as real estate goes, anything that is below Montgomery Street and above the water is now called Federal Hill.” Rebranding the historic working-class Locust Point neighborhood as Federal Hill provides a clear sign of gentrification. After learning the house will likely sell for around \$340,000, Nick Sobotka storms out.

This scene delivers the message that the white working class gets exploited, too. It can be reasonably presumed that Nick's aunt got nothing close to \$340,000 when she sold the house. An evolution of the blockbusting practices of the twentieth century, real estate agents and developers are now buying low from the working class, remodeling the homes, rebranding the

area, and then selling high to the “new aristocracy.” Even today, homes on Reynolds Street are typically appraised at \$200,000 to \$300,000, well below the 2003 prices on Federal hill (Zillow, 2019). Now, houses on Covington Street where Nick had been looking are priced between \$600,000 and \$800,000 (Zillow, 2019). Investors currently seize the opportunity to develop historically working-class urban areas into communities for affluent young professionals (Slater, 2006). Accordingly, areas that had been characterized as red by the HOLC are sometimes now seeing large amounts of capital investment and increasing economic opportunities—but not in ways that benefit the neighborhoods’ original residents.

The Dual Economy: Property Ownerships and Class Divides

The Wire illuminates a great deal about the role of property ownership in the divide between the 90% and the 9.9%. It also sheds light on the 0.1%: people with the “kind of money that can buy elections” and who control over 22% of the nation’s wealth (Stewart, 2018). Westside kingpin, Stringer Bell, understood that owning property and appreciating capital was essential to joining this class, his ambition to build long-term wealth was made evident in numerous ways. In Season One, the audience sees him taking economics classes, using his coursework to help manage an active stock portfolio. In Season Two, he calls his broker asking him to sell his cell phone stock, with an added ironic element of him explaining to his fellow gangsters afterwards that market saturation drove his decision. In Season Three, he is intently focused on becoming an established real estate developer and “running the city” (S3 E1). The only way Stringer could position himself to run the city is by joining the 0.1%, something he dies trying to do.

When Stringer is murdered in one of his downtown developments in Season Three, Detective Bunk Moreland stands over his corpse and states to his fellow officers, “Owner and co-developer of this here. And other downtown real estate. Well-proprietyed man he was” (S3 E12). A few episodes earlier Stringer informed Detective McNulty that he was building upscale condos near the Hippodrome Theatre in the heart of downtown. Although only a few neighborhoods away from the Franklin Terrace where Stringer grew up, the downtown condos he is developing represent an entirely different world. His death at the site of this property potentially signifies the rigid nature of American class mobility. Even though he was only a few blocks from his first home, he was an upstart. He travelled into a world that wasn’t his and tried to live a life he wasn’t born into and couldn’t claim. In the end, a man known for his detailed financial analyses had to pay the ultimate price for his economic ambition.

Andy Krawczyk, Stringer’s partner in real-estate development, is also present at the site when Stringer is murdered. The gunmen let him live after he grovels, cries, and begs for his life, and soon after the paramedics respond to calm him with oxygen. Police Major William Rawls gestures towards Krawczyk, saying, “Mayor's office already called twice, worried sick about the man. That's a whole lot of campaign contributions sitting on the back of that ambo.” Krawczyk, a white male, holds a place among Baltimore’s 0.1%. His *modus operandi* is buying elections, making sizable contributions to shape outcomes and gain influence. Freshly informed of the double murder of Mr. Bell and his associate, the mayor's office shows immediate concern only about Krawczyk continuing to be a source of campaign cash. In return for his contributions, the city funnels Krawczyk federal development grants and other taxpayer dollars.

While government funds flow freely to many affluent downtown developers in *The Wire*, Franklin Terrace (where Stringer grew up) and other adjacent neighborhoods remain starved of public investment. The game of downtown development includes skimming dollars from the top, necessarily strangling those at the bottom. Money is never scarce when downtown suits want dollars for upscale developments. However, the well runs dry for those in need in West Baltimore. This discrepancy exists in the private marketplace as well: In the last 5 years, private banks have invested \$860M in downtown Baltimore, while lower- and middle-income neighborhoods that comprise two-thirds of the city have received \$780M in the same period (Abello, 2017).

Despite Stringer's best efforts to play the real estate game like the Krawczyks of the world, he fails to draw even a dollar from the government redevelopment pot. The wider system willingly takes Stringer's cash, but keeps him away from its perks. The downtown suits—the same ones whom Avon Barksdale presciently tells Stringer can see his “ghetto ass coming from miles away” (S3 E11)—play Stringer for all he is worth. Stringer dresses the part, schools himself up, applies his smarts, switches dialects, and adopts a demeanor sure to match the smoothest of his successful green- and blue-lined counterparts. But the gatekeepers born on the other side of the neighborhoods' dividing lines know how to take advantage of him while keeping him sidelined from the biggest game in town. As D'Angelo offers shortly before his death in Season Two, while in a prison book club discussing *The Great Gatsby*:

Where we come from, what we go through, how we go through it — all that shit matters. [...] Like, at the end of the book? Boats and tides and all? It's like, you can change up. You can say you somebody new. You can give yourself a whole new story. But what came first is who you really are, and what happened before is what really happened. It doesn't matter that some fool say you different, 'cause the only thing that make you different is what you really do, or what you really go through. (S1, E6)

Conclusion

The disastrous housing policies of the early and mid-twentieth century, born of shortages after the Great Depression, exacerbated poverty and poor living conditions for the black residents of West Baltimore. Developers and realtors profited by exploiting inherently discriminatory regulations resulting from Roosevelt's New Deal efforts to address the shortages, of which redlining was one, and by engaging in predatory practices such as blockbusting. These practices systematically shut most African Americans in urban areas out of the opportunity to build home equity, the engine that spurred the 20th century burgeoning of the American middle class. Public housing schemes also served to increase segregation, sequestering a large segment of the city's African American population in dense, underserved pockets of urban decay, and denying them the key mechanism for wealth accumulation available to the white working class. Such factors condemned many in Baltimore's black community to a perpetual underclass that would endure across generations and created opportune conditions for the emergence of the local drug trade.

For all the harm inflicted on Baltimore's residents by politicians, developers, and others in positions of power, acting in accord with racist ideologies and in pursuit of personal gain, the housing landscape of Baltimore is only one of the factors influencing life outcomes. It is only partially determinative of how individuals negotiate the many systems that afford or constrain opportunity. *The Wire* takes seriously the diverse elements shaping personal experience and outcomes, but situates these in the space and time of the inner city.

The embodied world of this inner city provides all the raw materials from which Bodie and Poots build their careers in the Terrace; its history, daily rhythms, and human drama are

everything for them. Having started much like they did, Stringer tries to fashion his life on the broader landscape, only to get shot down at the moment of his highest reach. This world is also where Marla, Elena, and Cheryl struggle to build lasting intergenerational wealth, while their respective partners remain committed to the public work of policing, comfortable with their middle class status. It is also where the port workers begin to taste the kinds of struggles the black community faced with the decline of companies like “the American Can” that had employed them, making viewers potentially wonder about the possibilities of worker solidarity across racial lines, the economic dream that MLK Jr. died trying to realize.

There is ample evidence to suggest that the densely populated and economically depressed conditions in the redlined neighborhoods of Baltimore have led to criminal behavior and violence (Jacobson, 2017). The next chapter will explore how these policies combined with economic pressures lead to criminality and violence. It will also explore the capital flows in Baltimore, uncovering how the drug trade, the industrial sector, the public sector, and the white collar developers and lawyers all work together to form a complex economic system.

Chapter 3: It's All In The Game: Neoliberalism and Destruction In *The Wire*

"When drug dealing is criminalized, only criminals sell drugs" -Peter Moskos, professor of criminal justice and former officer in the Boston Police Department

Trickle-Down Economics and the War On Drugs

Nobel laureate Paul Krugman argues that a fundamental flaw of unrestricted capitalism is that it can put unwanted costs on a non-consenting party (2010). The concept of an externality is rather simple; it is a cost or a consequence not paid for by the party who produced that cost. Accordingly, it is a cost a private entity or institution passes onto the broader public, reducing their own costs but burdening society as a whole. When markets are not properly regulated, as they often are not, capitalism can quickly digress into a competition of externalization (Pieck, 2016). The firms and organizations that are able to externalize costs the best are typically the ones that make the most profit. Given the general dysfunction of public and private institutions in Baltimore, competitive forces jockeying for an advantage in a game of short-term success have produced externalities leading to particularly destructive harms.

Like many principles of economics, the notion of externality does not in itself fully describe Baltimore's institutionally engendered harms. The costs placed on the citizenry are not always direct material costs. Instead, actions that serve the interests of an institution often benefit that institution while running counter to the long-term interests of citizens, damaging the economy and prospects for stable livelihoods. For the purposes of this paper, the indirect costs incurred by the citizenry and resulting from the behavior of the formal and informal institutions will be referred to as externalities.

Virtually all the institutions of Baltimore engage in externalizing behavior. It's all part of "the game." For the informal drug economy, a highly consequential externality is violence, which drives residents and tourists away and supports the distribution of a product so damaging to users that it collapses the city's labor force. In the Baltimore Police Department, senior ranked officers require the rank-and-file to prioritize crime statistics and low-level arrests over actually targeting criminal organizations, allowing patterns of violence to persist throughout the city. In the political realm, corporate dollars control municipal elections and, accordingly, politicians must cater their efforts towards their donors. In the schools, teachers must teach within the standardized testing paradigm in order to secure federal and state dollars for the school budget, no matter the lost opportunities to meaningfully engage young minds.

The conservative neoliberal swing of the late twentieth century accounts for much of what *The Wire* shows to be the destructive nature of "the game." It is the era of the free market, but the unfree body. It is an era in which Reagan proudly declared, "As government expands, liberty contracts" (Saletan, 2006), while simultaneously incarcerating more individuals than presidents before him. The impetus for mass incarceration, however, was sparked earlier, during the Nixon Era. Although Lyndon B. Johnson's "war on poverty" was successful, it was short lived (Katz, 1989). The war on poverty was swiftly terminated by Richard Nixon once he took office, shifting the nation's attention away from economic disparities and towards law and order. Scholars currently argue that Johnson's attention to black Americans in his Great Society efforts sparked a conservative backlash that served effectively to criminalize being black (Mankiller et al., 1999). Nixon won the 1968 election on a law-and-order platform and in 1971 officially

declared a “war on drugs” (Dufton, 2012). At the time, drug use was nothing like the problem it would later become.

Nixon, however, had political motivations for igniting this vicious war. Nixon’s former Assistant for Domestic Affairs, John Ehrlichman, later explained the basis for this strategy. He said the Nixon Administration had two enemies: the African American community and war protestors. He explained, “We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities” (Lopez, 2016). He ends his comments by admitting the administration knew they were lying about drugs being a significant societal problem. By criminalizing drug use as they did, the administration engineered new mechanisms of authority and undermined those communities they deemed a threat. Nixon effectively used policy and propaganda to spark a decades long war that controlled and incarcerated his opponents. In 1970, one year after the start of the Nixon administration, there were 357,000 people incarcerated. By the time the war on drugs was firmly established a decade later, 513,000 Americans were behind bars (DuVernay, 2016).

While the political rhetoric regarding drugs faded during Carter’s presidency, Ronald Reagan did not hesitate to revitalize this domestic war. Reagan, a staunch fiscal conservative and a champion of small government, had no problem spending billions for drug enforcement and prison expansion. When Reagan first declared crack an epidemic and enemy of the people, it was not yet the urban problem it became. Only after the U.S government funneled billions of dollars to Latin American cocaine distributors did crack become a blight in the American city (Kerry et al., 1988). Instead of working to address this national emergency, Reagan slashed funding for

rehabilitation programs and supported harsh criminal legislation such as the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. The 1986 bill mandated a five-year sentence for possession of a mere five grams of crack cocaine while simultaneously mandating a five-year sentence for possession of up to 500 grams of powder cocaine. This law increased the average non-violent drug offense sentence by 50% (Chappell & Maggard, 2007). By 1990, 1,179,200 Americans were incarcerated (DuVernay, 2016).

The war on drugs was not simply a Republican issue. Bill Clinton ran on a campaign of reforming our legal system. However, once in office he signed legislation such as the 1994 Crime Bill,³ which supported mandatory minimums, three-strike policies, and truth in sentencing (making parole more difficult). By 2001, 1,962,800 Americans were incarcerated, the highest number per capita in the world (DuVernay, 2016). Between 1980 and 1997, the number of non-violent drug offenders in American prisons rose from 50,000 to 400,000 (Drug Policy Alliance, 2018).

Currently, even the most unrepentant proponents of the war on drugs admit it was a racially motivated mechanism for social control, destined to contribute to cyclical poverty and trauma in urban African American communities. This criminalization of a health crises had catastrophic effects on the ability of many African Americans to earn an income and, thereby, build personal wealth. If beating poverty requires being mistake-free for 20 years, the war on drugs made this virtually impossible for many growing up in an urban environment. In the year 2000, more black men were in prison than were enslaved in 1850 (Baradaran, 2017).

³ This is the common name of *The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act* of 1994, H.R. 3355, Pub.L. 103–322.

The so-called war was also wholly ineffective in stopping the drug trade. Peter Collins and David Brody, authors of *Crime & Justice in the City As Seen Through The Wire* (2013), argue that the era's draconian law enforcement policies actually caused the expansion of the domestic drug trade by increasing the supply of high quality drugs at low prices. Meanwhile, drug-related deaths tripled from 1980 to 2007. Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign and related efforts appear to have done nothing to decrease drug use among adolescents (Mackey-Kallis & Hahn, 1991). The war on drugs was tremendously costly, too. Harvard economist Jeffrey Miron concluded that decriminalization during the period when the war on drugs raged would have saved \$41.7 billion in enforcement and incarceration costs (2010). Ted Sorensen, speechwriter, lawyer, and influential adviser to President Kennedy, decried the sensationalization of drug use in America, claiming it let politicians "off the hook" by providing a scapegoat for the poverty and crime throughout the country (Baradaran, 2017). Rather than focusing on the need for adequate social services, school funding, and effective policies, public discourse seized on drugs as a convenient excuse for America's deep-rooted economic inequality.

Coinciding with the war on drugs was the rise of new economic policies that favored the wealthy, couched in language that further rationalized increasing inequity. Berkeley economist Emmanuel Saez observes:

Wealth concentration has followed a U-shaped evolution over the last 100 years: It was high in the beginning of the twentieth century, fell from 1929 to 1978, and has continuously increased since then. (2016)

In 1978, the top 0.1% of the population owned 7% of the nation's wealth; in 2012, it owned 22% (Saez, 2016). While Nixon and Reagan both allocated ample funds for the war on drugs, their pockets were empty when it came to fund social programs for the poor. Nixon argued that welfare created dependence on government support and instead championed black capitalism (Marable, 2015). Although the phrase is catchy, black capitalism, in reality, represented the economic abandonment of impoverished black communities. A self-avowed fiscal conservative, in actual practice Reagan had no problem spending money, ballooning the national deficit from \$738 billion to \$2.1 trillion during his time in office (Friedman, 1992). Welfare, however, was out of the budget. He repeatedly propagated the trope of the exploitive “welfare queen,” winning elections and public support through this form of racialized scapegoating. His appeal was rooted in the stereotype that African Americans lived lavish lifestyles off of taxpayer dollars.

Reagan also was a proponent of supply-side economics, which advocates slashing taxes for the wealthy under the pretense that they would then spend that money on job creation. Beneath the surface of this policy, however, were racist intentions. As one of Reagan's main advisors, Lee Atwater, explains:

By 1968 you can't say "nigger" — that hurts you... You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites (1991)(Knuckey, 2005).

Similar to the war on drugs, “Reaganomics” was intended to harm and control black Americans. Reagan continued Carter-era trends of deregulating key financial, commercial, and industrial sectors. Reagan was not the only chief executive inclined in such ways. Just weeks after Clinton signed the 1994 Crime Bill, he signed legislation supporting the deregulation of the financial

industry (Frank, 2016). Policies reducing government oversight, in both Republican and Democratic administrations since the 1970s, opened the door to subprime lending and other predatory practices that furthered consolidation of wealth and political power for the 0.1%, with much of that wealth siphoned from low-income communities that were already hurting from the loss of social services.

This background sets the economic context for *The Wire*. The show is a reflection of the intense criminalization of the street economy and the self-serving machinations of an elite capitalist class. Both economies produce detrimental effects. The violence and destructive consequences of the domestic drug trade is undoubtedly horrific. However, the drug trade exists in systematic relationship to the formal, government-sanctioned economy which both enables and benefits from the illicit trade. Moreover, the core characteristics of this trade and other elements of the informal economy are a predictable product of late 20th century deregulation of American capitalism. Extreme poverty and environmental degradation are inevitable externalities within systems where the wealthy and powerful can, with impunity, extract resources for their own benefit and to the detriment of others. *The Wire* highlights these legal and economic injustices. Conventional modes of employment and methods for capital acquisition within African American communities were forcefully obliterated by destructive institutions that changing policies and cultural trends allowed to flourish.

It's Just Business: The Economics of the Drug Trade

The Wire is a complex and intricate story about the American city, with its most consistent rhythm the violent disruption of the street economy by the police. At the outset, it is important to confirm that the street economy is, above all, an economy. Despite the best efforts of government agencies to vilify, demonize, and destroy it, the street economy persists. In a 2016 talk at Bucknell University, David Simon explained, "The drug trade is the largest employer in my city by far." Johns Hopkins University comes in a distant second (Hughes, 2016). Simon argues that telling residents not to join the drug trade is like telling West Virginians born into a mining town not to join the coal industry. Each industry causes severe detriment to human well-being in its own way. For the drug trade, it is the violence and addiction. On a planetary scale, the coal industry is arguably more destructive, hurtling us towards a global environmental catastrophe. Yet, extending the analogy, no one is declaring a war on coal miners or criminalizing them for gravitating towards their region's primary employer.

Drug dealers are not inherently immoral humans with nefarious intentions to harm others. Nor is their goal, as is sometimes characterized, to throw civilization into a chaotic state for unscrupulous personal gain. Rather, they are rational individuals responding to the institutional and economic circumstances of their lives. Chapter 1 of this paper empirically demonstrated that the practice of redlining has lowered expected income for children born in West Baltimore. The drug trade provides one of the more lucrative and, therefore, reasonable options in a severely depressed geography. Bates College Professor of Economics Jonathan Kurzfeld has conducted empirical research in this area and summarizes his work by stating, "Gangs are modeled as profit-maximizing entities in an informal marketplace where the gangs interact strategically to

capture market share and provide contract enforcement” (Kurzfeld, 2019). Contract theory and legal contract enforcement is an essential part of institutional economics (e.g., Williamson, 1979). Part of the violence of the drug trade can be attributed to a lack of formal “contract enforcement.” Without the protections of a legal system contractual disputes must be handled by other means, typically the use of force. In the case of the drug trade, violence is the means through which the industry settles its disputes. The “muscle” of the organizations, thus serves the enforcement function within an informal legal system. From this perspective, while horrific, violence is a rational and necessary part of an economic order. In sum, the drug trade in *The Wire* comprises individual agents who maximize utility and respond rationally to their economic and social positionality, their status born of redlining and other blatantly racist policies.

Like the analogous enforcement mechanisms, the inner city’s informal economy is quite similar to the broader formal economic system. Ironically, because of its illegality, the street economy of *The Wire* represents the free market in its purest form. There are no laws or regulations restricting the operation of economic forces. There are no lobbyists or corporate dollars influencing political decisions. There are no legal complexities creating barriers to entry or requirements for permits. To enter the drug trade, one only needs to find someone to supply the product and someone to sell it to. *The Wire* lays bare the fundamentals of neo-classical economic theory. In the series, the street economy follows the laws of supply and demand, price elasticity, firm market control, and consumer power. The informal economy entails continuous negotiation of product quality, price, and real estate.

In Season Two, Stringer Bell, deputized head of the Barksdale organization while Avon is incarcerated, is forced into a difficult position. With no muscle and a poor quality product, he

fears the organization may lose its real estate. He takes economics classes at a local community college and consults his professor for help. He queries, “What are the options when you've got an inferior product in an aggressive marketplace?” The professor tells him that if he has a large market share he could buy the competition. However, with no mechanisms in place for legal contract enforcement and no muscle to impose an informal deal on another organization, a buyout is not an option. The professor then suggests a rebranding of his product, which Stringer decides to undertake. When he proposes this change at a Barksdale strategy meeting, it is clear that all of the crew’s younger members understand the fundamentals of rebranding and marketing. They agree to frequently change the name, the vial color, and “[g]ive each tower its own name, right? And then...do, like, some fake competing” (S2 E5).

Despite the the business acumen of the savvy of the younger dealers, the success of this strategy is short lived; fiends are perceptive and sensitive to product quality in a way that most consumers are not. Stringer is stuck with an inferior product and no ploy to aggressively sell it. Later in the season, Proposition Joe, true to his character, approaches Stringer with a proposal that might solve his problem. Prop Joe asks for control of two of the Franklin towers in exchange for providing Stringer access to Prop Joe’s high quality heroin supply—exactly what the Barksdale organization is lacking. Prop Joe reminds Stringer of the market power consumers wield, stating, “You got half the Westside coming over to Fallsway twice a day because Eastside dope be kicking the shit out of Westside dope” (S2 E7).

The addicts traveling to Eastside to take advantage of market competition represents a deviation from the prior season. In Season One, when the Barksdale organization sees the quality of their product briefly dip, their profits actually increase. Stringer explains to his lieutenants the

inelasticity of demand for the junkies' high stating that addicts always need dope and will even buy more if the product is weak. He concludes by stating, "If we fuck up, we do better" (S1 E9). Season One presents the Barksdales' control of the drug trade as somewhat monopolistic; they set prices and have very little competition, especially on the Westside. However, in Season Two, the market evolves into what can be considered a competitive oligopoly between the firms controlling districts D4 and D1. Despite the encroachment on Barksdale territory, Stringer is hesitant to accept Joe's proposition, remembering the violence it took to gain control of the towers. Prop Joe reminds Stringer, "This shit is just business, String. Buy for a dollar, sell for two. That's all it need be. You got the Towers, I got what goes in them." Stringer, a student of economics, is sold by this argument.

When Proposition Joe's crew moves in from the Eastside to take control of two of the towers, the game shifts. For the first time, the series portrays direct, market-based competition between the two rival organizations. Bodie's crew members express their frustrations with the free market and pressures to be "[h]ustling around cutting prices and doing shit" (S2 E10). The crew's instinct is to run their competitors off with force, but they quickly realize this is not a viable option because that would also run off the good dope. So Bodie decides to use the free market to his advantage. Bubbles is attempting to make a deal with an Eastside dealer when Bodie interjects. When Bodie learns Bubbles is getting "two dimes for \$25," he slashes his prices, offering him "two dimes for 15, with the ice on top for free." This moment represents a pivotal point in the show's portrayal of the local drug economy. The organizations quickly become price takers and the consumers benefit greatly from the competition. Up until this point, fiends were disrespected, mistreated, and swindled. With the introduction of competition, the

dealers quickly become personable salesman fighting to give their customers the best deal possible. Bodie acknowledges the game has changed, telling his crew, “That's what's up, see? The game now is that we gotta sell more of this good shit than they do.”

This oligopolistic competition is short lived. Stringer and Prop Joe soon realize that if they form a cartel, consumer power will diminish. They collectively decide to form the “New Day Co-op,” which shares product and territory and controls for prices. To begin Season Three, Stringer explains this shift to his organization. Nearly everyone offers in response that taking corners on Fayette Street (center of District D4, just south of Lexington Street) is the organization's most strategic move. The crew members state that they will look like “bitches” if they “don’t have good territory to stand on” (S3 E1). Stringer rejects their focus on territory, countering that the costs of acquiring the territory is too high. It would lead, he explains, to “dead bodies and police attention,” the biggest threat to their industry. Stringer further explains that after they cut their control of the towers in half and focused on product, their profits increased 8 or 9%. “Your territory ain't gonna mean shit if your product is weak,” he continues. “Go ahead and ask them motherfuckers trying to sell them Ford Tempos, and you got niggers riding around in Japanese and German cars in America” (S3 E1). While there may be flaws in Stringers parallelism, comparing the informal municipal drug trade to international business conglomerates, Stringer’s comments accentuate his commitment to turning the drug trade into a more standard industry.

By switching their economic arrangement from a competitive oligopoly to a cartel, Stringer and Prop Joe are able to further increase profits while simultaneously reducing violence. They wholesale their product to the majority of the local dealers in exchange for territory. With

this model, they are able to implement price controls, reducing the consumer's market power.

They also schedule meetings to discuss business and resolve territorial disputes, thereby reducing violence and police attention to members of the co-op.

The Game is the Game: The Violence of the Drug Trade

Reconciling sympathies for the human experience portrayed in *The Wire* with the show's violence is likely a challenge for most of its viewers. On one hand, the violence is an inevitable product of all the systemic ills of the American city: structural racism, redlining, discriminatory policies, segregation, population density, the war on drugs, and economic scarcity. On the other, the brutality shown is explicit and shocking: characters order hits and pull the trigger while their victims beg for their lives. Notably, this drama that takes such an intimate look at the humanity of its characters, simultaneously invites viewers to consider the historical dynamics that lead to the violence they see. Neither the tragedy of this violence nor the culpability of those who perpetrate it is questionable. But it is more important, from a systems perspective, to understand this culture of violence within the dynamics of the drug trade, particularly why and how it perpetuates violence. Scholars contend that correcting the broader power structures that create the conditions for violence will be more effective in stopping brutality than working from the ground up, arresting, indicting, and convicting violent offenders one by one (Rodricks, 2018).

The violence of the drug trade is, in some important ways, harder to discuss than its economics. Conservatives propagate simplistic formulations like "black-on-black crime," a trope they use to bolster the claim that black America is at fault for its creating its own economic, social, and legal circumstance. Superficially, this formulation has served to clear the

conscience of the supremacist collective and deflect its attention from a history of wrongdoing. However, any depth of analysis of so-called black-on-black crime provides proof that American's history of discriminatory policy continues to have profoundly detrimental effects on its communities. Economists have concluded that inequality has a robust and statistically significant impact on violent crime. Those who find themselves in an economically disadvantaged position are far more likely to commit violent crime (Kelly, 2006). Furthermore, segregation, poverty, and a distrust of judicial systems are all strong correlates with high rates of homicide (Leovy, 2015). Although there is contradictory evidence on this matter about which scholars disagree, many have argued that low-traffic areas in densely populated regions—a perfect description of Eastern and Western Baltimore, with nearly 20,000 abandoned homes—are ideal locations for violent crime (Duncan, 2018). Overall, Western and Eastern Baltimore match these characteristics for the factors that contribute to violent crime: gross economic inequality, racial segregation, abject poverty, distrust of civic institutions, vacant property. Redlining, housing policy, and the war on drugs—not the victims of these—are all to blame for these conditions. Declines in formal employment opportunities also contribute to violent crime, as sociologists Edward Shihadeh and Graham Ousey conclude:

The findings reveal that a decline in the access to low-skill jobs increases violence indirectly by first increasing economic deprivation. We model these relationships for racially disaggregated populations and find that the effects are similar for blacks and whites. The analysis supports a macro-social link between violence and urban industrial restructuring in central cities. (1998)

Between 1950 and 1995, Baltimore lost over 100,000 thousand manufacturing and industrial jobs (Covert, 1995). This paper has already briefly addressed the effects of the decline of industrial jobs, noting the demise of the American Can Company and the proliferation of the drug trade in

areas where former industrial workers lived. Later, this paper will cover similar employment dynamics for mostly white port workers. Industrial decline is yet another correlate with violent crime—one that characterizes inner city Baltimore.

The war on drugs also fueled the violence in Baltimore to a degree hard to overstate. Intense criminalization of low-level offences disincentivizes those offenders from committing more violent offenses. If, in theory, an offender can get 25 years to life in prison for a crack cocaine violation, then the sentence for a violent offense is likely only marginally more punitive, if at all. By not differentiating between the two crimes, the American legal systems sends the message that both are equally wrong and destructive. Additionally, the attention local and federal police departments have given to drug cases has also led them to divert resources away from violent, high-level crime and towards minor, non-violent offenses. This misdirection of focus reduces the number of convictions for violent crimes, including murders, leaving more unsolved. This situation actually increases homicide rates because it lowers the disincentive for committing a homicide. Additionally, economists have found that disparities in how our criminal justice system responds to homicides based on the racial characteristics of the victims creates differential rates of violent crime (O’Flaherty & Sethi, 2010). With lesser degrees of enforcement when the victim is black, crimes against black victims become more likely, perpetuating a cycle of devaluing black lives. These same economists have linked levels of street activity to racial differences in violent crime, indicating that a street-based industry like the drug trade, an arena of economic activity that grows out of racist housing and other policies, is a driver of violence in black communities.

As concerning as the effects of the war on drugs are on violent crime, its effects on non-violent offenders contribute indirectly to rates of violence. Once individuals are released from prison for non-violent offenses, such as possession or dealing, it is notoriously difficult for them to turn their lives around. A felony conviction significantly reduces the likelihood for a person to find legal employment and studies suggest that the earning potential for a felon drops up to 40% once convicted (Collins and Brody, 2013). In the already difficult employment market of low-income urban communities, the war on drugs made matters decidedly worse—a feature of life in Western Baltimore dramatized in *The Wire*. A key point here is that the war on drugs amplified the mutual reinforcement of non-violent and violent crimes and exacerbated violence in the American inner-city overall.

The prevalence of violence in *The Wire* is a direct reflection its prevalence in the drug trade. The circumstances that produce rampant violence are endemic to any industry that has no legal recourse for enforcing contracts or other means of orderly self regulation. Violence also is used to manage human resources, maintain a complex social order, build brand and market-shaping reputation, and otherwise advantage business outcomes. Thus, violence in *The Wire* is largely a matter of business. When the sympathetic and remorseful D'Angelo Barksdale ("D") confronts his uncle about the killing of a janitor, William Gant, who had earlier testified against D'Angelo, Avon tells him not to worry about the murder because it doesn't concern him. Avon says, "If we did, we had a reason. And if we didn't, we had a reason" (S1 E2). Avon uses murder as a tool based on a rational decision regarding benefit to the organization—in this case, both (1) warning off other potential state's witnesses, a crucial consideration, and (2) less

importantly, keeping his nephew in the game.⁴ Gant initially testified against D'Angelo after D'Angelo was attacked in one of the Franklin Towers and responded by shooting his attacker. After Avon pays off witness for a false statement, D'Angelo is found not guilty of murder. Still, Avon chastises D'Angelo for his response to what would have amounted to a minor attack, "So, the first thing you do, you get all emotional you pull your gun out, you do some dumb shit that now we got to work around" (S1, E1). Murder is acceptable, but only for business purposes. Getting "emotional" is an unacceptable reason to commit a violent crime. Avon is evidently not upset by the loss of the life, but rather by the "costs [of] time and money" to his organization for getting D acquitted (S1, E1).

When Stringer and Prop Joe decide to create the New Day Co-op—a significant change to their usual way of doing business—they face a daunting barrier: violence. Specifically, they must manage the confrontation between up and coming Western district drug dealer, Marlo Stanfield, and established kingpin, Avon Barksdale. Both these men rely on violence as a means of territorial acquisition and control, coming from a history that showed them no other way than brute force and intimidation. They are the robber barons of the drug industry, using whatever means necessary to get ahead. When Prop Joe and Stringer Bell meet, it is always explicitly about business, "buying for a dollar, selling for two." When Avon and Marlo talk about the drug trade, they always refer to it as "the game." Structurally, *The Wire* reveals two countervailing trends: a refinement of the game towards more conventional business-like approaches pursued by Prop Joe and Stringer, and the devolution of the traditional drug-dealing game a Marlo's hand, towards one that lacks any moral maxims or operational codes other than rapaciously capitalistic

⁴ Avon's love for and loyalty to his nephew is another factor in this decision, to be sure, a part of the plot line of *The Wire* that is complex, intense, and among the most emotionally dramatic and consequential.

maximization of personal gain. The game is far more violent than the new Stringer/Prop Joe way of doing business. The game—which ultimately is economic in nature—entails competition for respect, status, and power. Its winners will be those with the most clout, often born of stoking the fear of others.

The game also has a built-in distancing mechanism. Referring to the drugs, the dealing, the shrewd calculations, and the homicidal violence of the industry as a “game” is a way of fictionalizing it. The trauma inherent in the drug trade as it emerged in the neighborhoods is a continuous re-enactment of the original African American trauma: uprooting, separation, inhumanity, degradation, and violence so great that analysts, such as Dionne Brand (2012), describe it as inescapable and irredeemable. Such experience requires mediation that makes it accessible through fictionalization—the experience of reality as something of a non-reality or stage play that stands apart from a more grounded, embodied engagement with the feelings, deeper meanings, and everyday intimacies of life. Fictionalization produces among actors a shared, implicit understanding that their lives, so frequently peppered with unspeakable loss, are nothing more than a game. It establishes violence as a mutually agreeable element in the competition for all participants who sign up to play. Calling it anything other than “the game” would make the recurring trauma too real to bear. Avon and Marlo are not just interested in business; they are interested in playing the game—because the game is the apex of business as they know it. It is their identity. It is also the one way they know how to survive.

In Season Three, Avon returns home from jail and immediately clashes with Stringer about how to best run the Barksdale organization. This tension is foreshadowed in the last episode of Season Two, when Stringer says, “Man, every market-based business runs in cycles

and we going through a down-cycle right now...” Avon cuts him off, saying, “String, this ain't about your motherfucking business class” (S2 E13). When Avon returns home he is appalled to see that the young kingpin wannabe, Marlo Stanfield, has all the best real estate. Avon insists he and Stringer engage in a turf war to retake the city’s most profitable sites for dealing. Stringer, working to remake himself and the organization, informs Avon of the co-op and the new ways the game is played/.

Stringer: I mean, you ain't gotta pay no price of buyin' no corners.

Avon: Since when do we buy corners? We take corners.

Stringer: You gonna buy one way or another. Whether it's with the bodies we lost or are gonna lose, time in the joint that's behind us or ahead of us.

Nothing in the game comes for free. Stringer understands the nature of transactional costs and their unavailability. Still, Stringer senses Avon’s hesitation and launches into an epic monologue about cooperation and his business aspirations: “We got every mob in town, Eastside, Westside, ready to pull together, share that good shit that Prop Joe is putting out there. If we get in the money game downtown, niggers ain't going to jail. We past that run-and-gun shit” (S6 E6). Unimpressed, Avon responds with perhaps his most memorable line in the whole show, “You know, I'm just a gangster, I suppose. And I want my corners.” This scene is the beginning of the end for Avon and Stringer. Truthfully, both are businessmen. But they are businessmen with different ambitions and divergent models of success. Avon wants to be a respected gangster, the kingpin in the realm of West Baltimore; Stringer wants to run the whole city, deciding elections like the 0.1%. A violent turf war between the Barksdale and Stanfield organizations ensues. At the end of Season Three, both Avon and Stringer meet their demise after they betray each other.

Avon gives Stringer up to hitman Brother Mouzone. Avon offers Mouzone money, saying the game is business, but Mouzone declines, explaining, “Business is where you are now. But what got you here is your word and your reputation.” Words, reputations, and violence are the only mechanisms for contract enforcement in *The Wire*; it is the street’s legal system. Using the police for protection is clearly not an option. While Avon may think like a businessman, by his own admission he is ultimately just a gangster; solving his problems like a legitimate businessman is not an option for him. He provides Stringer’s location to Mouzone and, accordingly, Stringer meets his violent end. Before his death, however, Stringer gives Avon up to the police. He calls a meeting with Western District Commander Bunny Colvin, and discloses the location of Avon’s weapons armory. When Bunny asks Stringer if Avon personally wronged him, Stringer responds “No, it’s just business.”

While it has always been just business with Stringer, this scene represents his ultimate attempt to depart from his past, his upbringing in the Western district projects. Rule number one of the street is no snitching; being labeled a snitch in *The Wire* is often a death sentence. By abandoning this core principle and turning to the formal legal system, Stringer attempts a full transformation. Unfortunately for Stringer, transitioning across boundaries is not possible, reforming the drug trade is not possible, and using formal means of enforcement, compliance, and control is not possible. Stringer is dead a few scenes later and, based on his tip to Bunny, Avon receives a thirty-year prison sentence.

With Avon and Stringer gone, Marlo Stanfield becomes the Westside’s kingpin. Marlo’s rise parallels Stringer’s in some ways. When Stringer was faced with an inferior product in an aggressive marketplace, his economics teacher told him to buy up the competition if had a large

enough market share. Unable to buy the competition without the means to enforce the agreement, Stringer decides to work with Prop Joe to form a cooperative. In Season Four, Marlo finds himself similarly without the product he needs for greater market share. But he refuses to join the co-op and is able himself to obtain a connection to good heroin. He also has control over most of West Baltimore's territory. Quite unlike Stringer, Marlo decides to “buy” the competition with force. He has the best “muscle” in West Baltimore and ruthlessly drops bodies until his demands are met. In Season Four, viewers see Bodie as an independent Westside dealer. Given his intellect and street savvy, he is able to build a successful corner operation. His independent success, however, is short lived. Marlo confronts him with an ultimatum, “With this spot all built up and shit, we need it, yo. Two choices—you can start taking our packages or you can step off” (S4 E3). While Marlo does not explicitly state it, Bodie actually has three choices: take the package, leave the corner, or die violently. Marlo effectively becomes the Standard Oil or Walmart of Western Baltimore, using aggressive methods to destroy the competition and increase market share.

While Marlo may otherwise be strategic as the CEO of his drug enterprise, he is uninterested in joining a discussion of the formal economy, just as he is uninterested in joining the formal economy itself. After one of Marlo’s dealers, Old Face Andre, is robbed by legendary stick-up artist Omar Little, Andre gives an emphatic and somewhat convincing plea for mercy:

And the government, right? If they have one of them terrorist attacks, they cut Delta or whoever some slack. The insurance companies, the banks, the whole NASDAQ and shit get some time to pay back what they owe, because the government know ain't nothing they could do. I mean, the fluctuation in the global economy and all. (S4 E4)

Marlo shows he is unimpressed and unconvinced, responding:

Omar ain't no terrorist. He just another nigger with a gun. And you ain't no Delta Airlines, neither. You just a nigger got your shit took. So, bring me what you owe and talk that global economy mess somewhere else.

A few episodes later, Marlo has Andre killed. While Marlo frequently shows he has great discipline, intellect, and economic understanding in how he runs his organization, he is uninterested in transcending the economic systems of West Baltimore. As Stringer says of Marlo in Season Three, “He only knows, what he knows.”

While violence is a horrific and destructive product of drug trade, it is also, in the logic of the industry, a necessity. The drug addict Bubbles sets up “Bubbles Depot,” a traveling convenience store based in a shopping cart. While business is initially successful, his lack of “muscle” or other types of protection makes business difficult. He frequently gets robbed by another local addict, who physically beats him and steals his money. Like any citizen normally would, Bubbles reports this problem to the police. The Baltimore police only worsens his situation, an officer telling him “You can't sell on the street without a license. And these movies, it's copyright infringement. That's a hefty fine.” Bubbles then effectively gets robbed by the police, too. This interaction highlights the need for informal enforcement in the street economy. Going to the police only makes the problems of street actors, living on the margins of the law, worse. Bubbles’ business ultimately fails because he is unable to use “muscle” or other forms of physical power and potential violence, despite trying, to protect his assets. His one attempt to protect himself through force—by poisoning his assailant—ends in unspeakable tragedy.

Ta-Nehisi Coates has written that virtually every black family in the Jim Crow south sought, wanted, and needed the “protection of the law” (2014). *The Wire* makes vivid the complexities of the relationship between black communities and the police mandated to serve all

citizens, showing a different, newer version of the same old problem. One dominant and recurring theme is the distance between police and the residents of the neighborhoods on their beat. Repeatedly, mothers and fathers, ordinary citizens, beg in public forums and private encounters, for more protection. Nonetheless, in the contemporary American city, black individuals still struggle to get protection of the law. Consequently, black Americans often must take law enforcement into their own hands.

The Bottom of the Bottom: Mobility in the Drug Trade

Season One closely follows the fortunes, foibles, and suffering of the four drug dealers in the pit: Bodie, Wallace, Poot, and D'Angelo. One of their first scenes together shows Wallace eating chicken nuggets. He comments about whoever invented the nuggets being “richer than a motherfucker.” D responds “Why? You think he get a percentage? Why not? Nigga, please, the man who invented them things just some sad-ass down at the basement of McDonald's thinking up some shit to make money for the real players.” D’s disheartened and pessimistic view of the exploitative nature of American capitalism is clearly rooted in his own circumstances. D is a low-level lieutenant working in the Barksdale organization's version of the basement, “the pit.” Despite his success and loyalty, he still works on salary.

On a similar, low-traffic day, D finds Bodie and Wallace playing checkers with a chess set. Upset by their lack of knowledge, D decides to teach them chess. The parallels between the chess game and the game they actually play are instantly apparent. You gotta capture the king to win the game. Avon is the king. The queen is the one making the moves; the piece reminds the boys of Stringer. Bodie asks D how to become the king, and D responds with one of the show’s

most quoted lines, saying, “See, the king stays the king, all right?”—an obvious reference to both the drug trade and American class mobility. The lesson they are to take away is that those in power stay in power. Class mobility in America is an exception, not an expectation (Moskos, 2016). D continues, explaining that the only pieces who can change roles are the pawns; if they make it to the other end they become queens. When Bodie asks if getting a pawn means he wins or is “top dog,” D responds, “No, it ain't like that, look. The pawns, man, in the game they get capped quick. They be out of the game early.” There is a moment of silence as they somberly acknowledge that they are all pawns in a brutal game of real-life chess. The silence is punctured by Bodie who retorts, “Unless they're some smart-ass pawns.” Bodie is an unusually sharp, insightful adolescent. In this particular instance, however, he is wrong. Bodie may be the smartest pawn in the game, but by the end of Season Four all three characters are victims of homicide. These characters’ willingness to play a game that will almost surely lead to death or incarceration is a powerful indictment of Baltimore’s economic systems. They are willing to die for a an economic apparatus that treats them as pawns.

Even for the kings and queens of the game, the game is not a viable means of long-term wealth acquisition. The most successful drug dealers in *The Wire* die or get arrested before they can establish a secure estate and pass their wealth to their children. Their finances remain precarious, precarity having followed them from rags to riches and back. While the drug trade may be an excellent means of quickly acquiring liquid assets, the illegality of the drug trades makes it hard to invest in long-term appreciating assets. Discrepancies in appreciating financial assets are a critical part of the racial wealth gap (Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). For some the game is

temporarily lucrative but even for the most successful, it doesn't allow them to cross class boundaries.

The Politics of Policing: Baltimore's Legal System

Season One Episode One of *The Wire* clearly establishes Baltimore as a firm-fisted police state where, ironically, the judicial system is above the law. After BPD detective Jimmy McNulty tells the municipal Judge Phelan he should have cleared the court due to potential witness intimidation, Phelan responds, "On what basis? It's an open court in a free nation of laws." McNulty responds, "I thought it was Baltimore." While there is evident sarcasm in McNulty's voice, a few scenes later the audience more realistically sees how the war on drugs has shaped the attitudes of BPD officers. After a few aggressive, low-level arrests, Kima Greggs makes fun of her subordinates, Detectives Herc and Carver, saying, "You heroic motherfuckers kill me. Fighting the war on drugs one brutality case at a time" (S1 E1). Carver responds "Girl, you can't even call this shit a war. Wars end." Herc and Carver embody the "bust-heads, tough-on-the-street" cops of which the show is critical.

While unproductive, their approach is a product of the larger issue of policing in Baltimore—specifically, departmental priorities directly resulting from the war on drugs. David Simon said of this drug war, "We trained a generation of cops how not to do police work" (Hughes, 2016). He makes his attitude on this matter very clear throughout *The Wire*. Virtually every episode of *The Wire* highlights the pressure police officer's face to provide statistical evidence of improvement in their outcomes, even if the evidence is falsified. But perhaps no

interaction better highlights these pressures than the conversation between recently appointed police Commissioner Cedric Daniels and his ex-wife, City Councilwoman Marla Daniels”:

Cedric: She wants me to juke the stats for Carcetti, this quarter and the next, hide the crime, get him elected as governor and make her the Mayor.

Marla: So do it. Burrell juke them before you. Warren Frazier before him. And, after you're gone, Rawls or whoever will juke them.

Cedric: So what? I'll swallow a lie when I have to. I've swallowed a few big ones lately. But the stat games, that lie, it's what ruined this department. Shining up shit and calling it gold, so majors become colonels and mayors become governors. Pretending to do police work while one generation fucking trains the next how not to do the job.

This brief conversation summarizes the typical power plays made in the Baltimore Police Department. Good stats lead to promotions and promotions lead to pay raises; it's all part of another game. By “juking” the stats, police can make a rising crime rate look like a falling one: felonies turn into misdemeanors, and misdemeanors disappear. While there are police officers in the department who genuinely care about solving violent crimes, the police department, in general, is only interested in the stats. “They’re dead in the wrong zip code,” is a phrase used by officers when referring to a “disposable” body. After decades of this type of policing, such norms become ingrained in the institution and the key mechanism for its self-preservation. If the last commissioner “juke” the stats and Daniels does not, then he looks worse—giving the impression that Baltimore has installed the wrong person in the role. The tragedy, as well as the irony, of this scene is that Daniels appears to be someone who could have actually changed the trajectory of the police department. He is one the officers shown to truly care about improving the department and targeting high-level crime. But, in *The Wire*, no single character proves to be able to alter the course of the city’s institutional juggernauts.

Ultimately, the juking strategy is counter-productive. Altering low-level drug statistics may help build the careers of police and politicians, but it doesn't help solve violent crime and make neighborhoods safer. By diverting the majority of their resources away from violent crime and towards the drug trade, the BPD reduces its capacity to police more violent crimes.

Researchers has also found empirical evidence to suggest that increases in drug arrests leads to increases in violence. The Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research concluded that a surge in drug arrests causes destabilization in a community that, in turn, can lead to a local increase in violence that may persist for over a year. Daniel Webster, the center's director, states:

The powerful market forces at play — a high demand for illegal drugs in a city where addiction is highly prevalent and a large supply of labor exists, with many individuals willing to engage in very dangerous work due to the lack of legal employment opportunities for individuals with criminal histories — and available research evidence suggest that drug law enforcement efforts rarely have lasting positive impacts on violence. (2018)

Although Webster, like David Simon, finds the war on drugs to be ludicrous, he does emphasize the importance of targeting violent offenders involved in the drug trade. He supports disseminating the message that selling drugs should be tolerated, but the violence associated with it will not be.

Webster's insights make the resignation of Cedric Daniels from his position as police Commissioner all the more unsettling. The police department is, of course, not solely to blame for the city's violence and related dysfunction. Baltimore's politicians put immense pressure on the police department to lower crime in unreasonably short periods of time. When, in Season Three, Mayor Clarence Royce learns that Councilman Thomas Carcetti is running against him, he immediately pressures the police department to alleviate the political pressure he faces. Royce

says to then-Commissioner Burrell, “We’ve got to show him something, right? - Four to five per cent drop in felonies. And murders. Get the murders down to under 250 for the year” (S3 E1).

While both goals are unrealistic, Burrell is incredulous at the targets for the homicide rate that Royce has proposed. Burrell knows that it is easy to lie about felony stats, but very hard to make dead bodies disappear from police records. Because of the Mayor’s request, Burrell has his commanders lie about felony stats. When Carcetti wins the mayorship on a crime-reform platform, he has put himself in the bind of confronting the reality of crime statistics—the falsified ones claimed by the previous administration and the actual ones coming from his police department. In order for it to seem like his reform is working, he, too, must “juke” the stats, leaving Baltimore in a never-ending cycle of institutional dysfunction.

The politicians also vehemently protect their wealthy and corrupt donors. Police officers and ambitious lawyers tiptoe around the city’s power players, living in constant fear that they will arrest or indict the wrong person and have the careers in public service cut short. These constraints necessarily hinder the administration of justice and, therefore, institutional reform in Baltimore. Politicians intervene to shut down asset investigations and scrutinization of high level individuals for purely political reasons. As detective Lester Freamon says, “You follow drugs, you get drug addicts and drug dealers, but you start to follow the money you don’t know what the fuck you’re going to find” (S1 E9). The only area of crime that interests the police and the politicians is drugs. Drug cases provide an easy way to cement African American dealers and users into a criminal class. Once investigators start to follow capital flows and paper trails, they may find that nearly everyone is connected to corruption and illegal activity—including the pocketing and laundering of drug money. The city of Baltimore hosts all kinds of criminals, but

only the pursuit of drug dealers and users is politicized and made critical to electoral success in the city.

Lawyers, politicians, and police officers are all complicit in this system. In Season Four, Detective Lester Freamon decides to finally follow financial leads. He issues subpoenas that hit numerous prominent politicians and business people. Narcotics attorney Rhonda Perlman is irate and complains to Freamon, “Four weeks before the Baltimore City primary, you hand me drug-money subpoenas that hit a dozen key political figures” (S4 E1). Perlman’s boss is on the mayor’s ticket and is up for re-election. The subpoenas hit many of the mayor’s key contributors, with potentially grave consequences for her career. She states “My boss is running two points behind in the polls with the mayor’s support. How is he gonna do if he pisses off Royce and starts dropping off incumbent tickets? Why if Demper [Perlman’s Boss] thinks I fucked him and he wins, I will be at Central Booking covering bail reviews” (S4 E2).

Perlman is not the only one upset with the subpoenas. After receiving his subpoena, State Senator Clay Davis storms into Mayor Clarence Royce’s office. The notably corrupt Davis delivers a classic monologue about the economic and political landscape of West Baltimore:

If some federal motherfucker comes through the door, I say, “Hey, it’s all in the game.” But a city police? Baltimore City? Hell, no. Can’t be happenin’, ’cause I know I have raised too much goddamn money for the mayor and his ticket. Hell, no! Ain’t no soul in the world that fuckin’ ungrateful! - Money laundering? They gonna come talk to me about money laundering? In West Baltimore? Shit. Where do y’all think I’m gonna raise cash for the whole damn ticket? From laundromats and shit? From some tiny-ass Korean groceries? You think I have time to ask a man why he givin’ me money? Or where he gets his money from? I’ll take any motherfucker’s money if he givin’ it away.

Unknowingly, Clay Davis is supporting the argument the crime is a response to “institutional circumstance and economic realities” (Kurzfeld, 2019). In effect, Davis makes the claim that the formal economy of Baltimore is insufficient to support his career objectives and his economic desires. He, therefore, turns to the informal economy for funds and commits crimes of his own to cover the evidence. To him, this is a reasonable choice. Yet, he is part of a system that intensely criminalizes drug dealers and users. He and the mayor profit from the system that they create. Through selective prosecutions and other manipulations of legal institutions, they exploit the criminal elements within Baltimore’s broader set of interleaving institutions to win elections and concentrate their power. Despite his contradictory and hypocritical logic, Davis is successful at convincing Clarence Royce to take his side. Royce orders commissioner Burrell to transfer Freamon and shut down the major crimes unit.

The politicians, lawyers, and police are all involved in games of their own, games of getting stats, promotions, votes, money, and power. They do this at the expense of the residents of Baltimore. Researchers argue that targeting high-level violent in Baltimore would be an essential step for reducing shootings and homicides (Webster, 2018). But this is not how “suits” get rich. They make their money off quick stats and low level arrests, encouraging the violence to persist. As detective McNulty summarizes:

If only half of you in the state's attorney's office didn't want to be judges, didn't want to be partners in a downtown law firm if you had the balls to follow through, you know what would happen? A guy like that would be indicted, tried and convicted. The rest of them would back up so we could push a clean case through your courthouse. But no, everybody stays friends. Everybody gets paid. And everybody's got a fucking future.

Race or Class? What We can Learn from the Ports

At one point in the city's history, the port of Baltimore sat at its economic epicenter. The steel, manufacturing, and shipping industry were all in close proximity, making the port a hub for laborers looking to earn decent wages in an affordable area. However, as noted above, 100,000 industrial jobs were lost in Baltimore between 1950 and 1995. The port and the surrounding region was one of areas hit hardest by this job loss. *The Wire* begins Season Two at the ports, analyzing a group of proud, hard-working individuals struggling to combat their unfortunate economic challenges. Season Two's focus on the economic dynamics at the ports represents a significant deviation from Season One, which focused almost entirely on the drug trade in West Baltimore.

Chapter 2 of this paper examined port worker Nick Sobotka's attempts to buy a house. Nick faced many of the struggles black Baltimoreans have faced; coming from a redlined area, he fell short when trying to purchase a home in a recently gentrified neighborhood adjacent to his. Examining the economy of the ports reveals powerful similarities in the broader life circumstance between the predominantly white port workers in the southeastern district and the African American residents of West Baltimore. Shihadeh and Ousey's finding that a decrease in industrial jobs leads to increased crime rates, regardless of a community's racial demographics (1998)

The port worker portrayed most prominently is Frank Sobotka, International Brotherhood of Stevedores (IBS) union treasurer. Frank sits at the political, economic, and social nucleus of the ports. As treasurer, he is tasked with providing economic stability to the stevedores struggling to land enough days on the job to make a living. To combat the severe decline over

recent years in available work, Frank has two primary objectives: (1) reopen the grain-pier and (2) dredge a canal entering the port so it is available to larger ships. Frank is diligent and ambitious; he hires high-powered lobbyist Bruce DiBiago to ensure his two projects get done. Given his efforts, Frank is shocked to learn that he is facing opposition from a black man, Vernon Motley, for his reelection campaign for treasurer of the IBS. Enraged, Frank shouts, “Black, white, what's the difference, Nat? Until we get that fucking canal dredged, we're all niggers, pardon my French” (S2 E7).

Frank's comment is profound. Scholars and policy makers have long struggled to define race as biology, appearance, and lineage, which have all proved to be insufficient indicators. What Frank is saying is that class is what defines race; regardless of skin color if you are poor in America, you are black. Accordingly, the black and white port workers should, as Frank sees it, be able to unite to overcome the changes in the industry. They also should be able to unite in their poverty. The skin color of the union leader or union member does not matter. Whatever the merits of his argument, it highlights the inextricable link between race and economic standing.

Frank's comments may seem unduly tinged with racism as well as self-servingly dismissive of his colleague's candidacy; in fact, Frank and other union leaders had previously promised Vernon Motley they would support him for treasurer this election. However, there are aspects of the job the majority of his peers do not know about. Given the economic conditions at the port, Frank becomes heavily involved in the smuggling of contraband, primarily drugs. Frank is connected to a group of high-level drug suppliers known as “The Greeks” who pay him by the shipping container. He has no desire to know what is in the containers; he is only interested in the cash the Greeks pay him per container. Importantly, Frank is not doing this for personal profit. Every

illicit dollar he receives he either invests in political lobbying for the canal and the grain-pier or gives to stevedores struggling to pay their bills. Given the dysfunction of Baltimore's political system, Frank understands that well-connected lobbyists and bribery are the only ways to get the necessary infrastructure projects accomplished. Frank's position forces him to play the game.

Frank is not the only one from the ports to get up in the game. While the majority of stevedores do not know of Frank's exploits, Frank's nephew Nick and son Ziggy quickly get caught up with drug dealing and The Greeks. Nick is initially extremely skeptical about getting involved in drug dealing and crime, emphatically stating, "I ain't standing out on no corner like some fucking project nigger so that I get popped for pocket change" (S1 E3). Despite his initial hesitation, the dynamics of his life lead him to the drug trade. An episode later we find Nick is justifying his criminal behavior to his uncle, saying, "I need the money. What? You think this shit is easy? You think it's fucking easy? You try living on five or six days a month. See how fast it puts you on your ass" (S2 E4). Regardless of race, a decline in formal industry and industrial jobs leads to crime. Empirical evidence proves this and Nick illustrates it. At first ardently opposed to drug dealing and crime, once Nick realizes the severity of his economic situation, dealing becomes justifiable action.

Frank's does his utmost to influence the political system for the benefit the stevedores. Others in the city will perhaps treat them with more respect than they do the drug dealers of West Baltimore, but still the dominant institutions and power players of Baltimore largely overlook them. Just like Stringer will always be a drug dealer, the stevedores will always be stevedores. As Frank explains to Bruce DiBiagio:

You know, back when we were kids Danny Hare's father stole a couple cases of cognac off a ship. Except when he gets it home, it ain't cognac, it's Tang. TV said it's what the

astronauts drank on their way to the moon. - You drink it - You could be an astronaut, too. All summer long, that shit was all the Hare kids drank. Tang with breakfast, Tang with lunch Tang when they woke up scared in the middle of the night. What do you think they grew up to be? Stevedores.

There is no class mobility for stevedores. Despite his efforts, Frank has a plight and ultimate fate similar to all the drug kingpins in the show. He gets indicted on an extensive list of felonies and then killed by the Greeks after they suspect Frank might snitch. His son, Ziggy, gets arrested on murder charges after killing one of the Greeks' associates and Nick gets arrested on drug charges. Frank's well-intentioned efforts also doom the union. After the legislators see that Frank has been indicted on racketeering charges, they vote against the grain pier. State legislators such as Clay Davis pocket the drug money for which Frank lost his life. After learning the grain pier won't be built, Frank laments, "You know what the trouble is, Brucie? We used to make shit in this country. Build shit. Now we just put our hand in the next guy's pocket" (S2 E11). Frank is killed in the next scene. While so much of the capitalist rhetoric in America revolves around the view that people work for what they get, *The Wire* reveals a different picture. Those who work hard for their living only end up losing to the people who stick their hands the laborers' pockets.

In 2013, an \$8.6 million project removed silt to dredge a canal to the port of Baltimore. In 2014, the port handled a record 9.7 million tons of cargo worth approximately \$52 billion and re-established itself as one of the top ten ports in America. Still, the union is floundering. High-level members have been indicted on felony charges and overall membership is declining (Ericson Jr., 2015). State officials have frequently cited a report that asserts the port employs 14,000 thousand people and generates \$3 billion a year in wages. But very few residents believe these statistics (Ericson Jr., 2015). Stats are all part of the game.

Who Really Profits Off the Drug Trade

While the political and economic systems portrayed in *The Wire* clearly work against the drug dealers and port workers, the drug trade provides unalloyed benefit to some. In the book *The Wire: Truth Be Told*, Rafael Alvarez writes in reference to the show:

Matter-of-fact awareness that the lives of inner-city blacks - to the cops, the community and the larger public - are not worth a dime. But the show goes a step beyond this: it is aware that these lives are also, paradoxically, worth quite a bit. The profits of the drug and sex trades travel out from the projects to banks, corporations, politicians, developers, while the unutterable suffering through which that money is made remains geographically contained. (2009, pg. 200)

The externalities generated by the activities of developers, politicians, and police affect the inner-city residents, including the dealers and users, the most. Much of the real cost for the short-sighted gain of the winners are paid by those in the city with the least. In contrast, the externalities of the drug trade remain “geographically contained”—that is, the people of neighborhoods where the dealers and users grew up, where the industry emerged, and where the game is played bear the full expense of what is not paid for in transactions. Even worse, the profits of the drug trade eventually flow out of the inner-city. The drug trade has grown into the economic foundation of the city of Baltimore.

These capital flows are ultimately what define class in *The Wire*. The drug dealers, the stevedores, and the developers in various ways end up giving money to government entities or officials. They pay off politicians, have assets or property seized, or invest in taxable goods or holdings. But the developers are the only ones who get anything from the government in return. This is what makes the developers part of the “aristocracy” or the 0.1%—their unbridled

influence on the policies of the city. When Frank Sobatka is aggressively angling for the grain pier, he notes, “The back door threat is that Andy Kraw or some other developer gets enough last-minute votes to sink the rehab money for the grain pier” (S2 E6). Predictably, the grain pier is never rehabbed and Andy Krawczyk gets to build and profit hugely from his condos. Money flows out of the ports and Western Baltimore. But it never flows back in.

Even though the grain pier was never built, Clay Davis got to pocket Frank Sobatka’s dollars. The audience later learns Davis uses this money to fund the mayoral ticket and to keep him and his allies in power. “Laundromats” and “Korean groceries” are not sufficient to fund Baltimore’s corrupt political game. The political system of Baltimore needs the drug trade; the last thing the drug trade needs is Baltimore’s political system. The drug trade, in a perverse way, revs the engine of Baltimore's formal economic and political systems.

Perhaps no one profits off the drug trade more than the city’s lawyers. In Season Two, we see stick-up artist Omar Little remind the Barksdale Organization’s defense attorney Maurice Levy of this fact. Omar is testifying against a Barksdale soldier, Marquis “Bird” Hilton, in the shooting of custodian William Gant. Levy is attempting to discredit Omar’s character based on his understanding that Omar makes his living robbing drug dealers:

Levy: You are amoral, are you not? You are feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade You are stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city.

-You are a parasite who leeches off -

Omar: Just like you, man.

Levy: the culture of drugs. Excuse me? What?

Omar: I got the shotgun. You got the briefcase. It's all in the game, though, right? (S2 E6)

Omar is right. Levy relies on the drug trade for his livelihood just as much as Omar does. Omar, however, lives in the world of the “unutterable suffering,” the world that must endure the violence that generates Levy’s profits. By the show’s end, Levy has risen to be the premier criminal defense in Baltimore, and Omar is dead. Omar is correct in saying, “ It’s all in the game, though,” but the game isn’t fair. It’s a game he is destined to lose.

In Season Five, Clay Davis describes at some length to Lester Freamon just how involved the city’s lawyers are in the game:

Davis: Follow the lawyers. Levy, Bronfman, Silverstein, Cray All those guys who take the high-end drug work. They don't just make money off the criminal fees. They're the ones who make a path for all this street-corner money. They showin' all these kingpin motherfuckers how to send it overseas, bring it back, invest the shit. They the ones who these ignorant ghetto motherfuckers always listen to when it comes to cash money. And Levy, man, he got the most grease.

Freamon: So Levy routes it through who?

Davis: Anyone who got a project or a game in need of cash. Developers, people lookin' to capitalize, elected folk like myself. Shit. There's a lotta people need a dollar now an' then. And the lawyers take their cut. On both ends, though I got to say he gonna let you rob one of his clients only so much.

Davis reveals the extent to which the formal “legal” economy profits off of the drug trade.

Everyone from developers to entrepreneurs rely on the drug trade for the much of the money they get from their customers, their investors, and their clients. They build their wealth on the backs of the people living and dying in redlined districts. They also are hypocritical and deceitful, hiding behind the screen of respectability when it serves their self-interest. While the state legislator’s would not vote for the grain pier because, supposedly, of Frank’s “dirty” money that bribed them, they have no problem letting Andy Krawczyk’s drug money buy their votes.

Conclusion

In the world of *The Wire*, those with next to nothing to lose end up down to nothing. Left with nothing are the addicts, the street runners, and the residents of neighborhoods barren of services, compromised in civility, and sometimes even stripped of soul. In return, they receive stray bullets, random bullying by law enforcement, and the burden of an array of material and social externalities that are cast off from other classes. The little that they once had and lost flows up through the hands of the corner boys, the lieutenants, the muscle men and ringleaders, and finally into the coffers of the kingpins. From there, everyone else takes a cut. As Clive Davis explains, the kingpins' money spreads out—overseas, back again, invested in the regional economy according to the counsel of lawyers and other advisors ready to take advantage of this rich resource for their own gain. Stringer's money ends up paying off politicians and fattening the capital assets of developers. The Barksdale organization and Marlo and his crew rely on Levy to keep them from the law, argue their cases in court, and spring them from prison, but also to broker their relationships with anyone looking to take their money in the most high-rolling part of the game. Above Western Baltimore, the peninsula, and other redlined districts of the city are layers of actors ready to exploit, skim, and bleed them all dry for the increase in opportunity to climb the steep ladder of American-style success.

The “unutterable suffering” of those left with nothing stems from dire material privation and also from the looming threat of violence. When it erupts, killing and maiming bystanders as well as intended victims, it serves to maintain an order that has no other mechanism of enforcement. Other than violence, there is no legislation, no regulation, no policing, no form of securing and establishing territories, boundaries, and control in the game. The game attracts and

involves everyone that it can, and the rules of the game are based in violence. Those like Prop Joe and Stringer who try to establish a cooperative order, using a different and more genteel set of moves, find themselves over-powered by the Marlo's of the world for whom the only move is to seize power.

The Dickensian state—or perhaps more aptly, Hobbesian state—of the inner-city, the original redlined districts, is sponsored by federal, state, and municipal policies. Among the most cynical, destructive, and dishonest of these is the war on drugs, launched in effect to criminalize black urban populations. The so-called war distorted all civic institutions in its path, particularly through the mechanism of the police force, to target the dealers and users already at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, incarcerating as many as possible for non-violent offenses, and leaving violence to thin the ranks of the rest. *The Wire* takes to task the “bust heads, tough-on-the-street” sort of policing Herc and Carver do. But just as violence becomes law according to capitalist logic in the neglected and underserved districts, pursuit of what is low-level and petty becomes law according to the logic of the war on drugs.

The Wire devotes considerable attention to what becomes of the bodies of victims of the game. Some are “floaters,” like the Eastern European woman trafficked in a modern slave trade—a dozen other women in the same haul suffocated in a container, a modern version of a ship's hold. Others get boarded up in “vacants.” Some have been randomly discarded, mutilated, and just a few are never found. After months during which there is a suspiciously low level of homicides, the police realize that there is a new tactic to hiding the murder victims. At the same time, Major Colvin, the Western District Commander is getting pressure to juke the stats. He inquires of the commissioner, “You can reclassify an agg assault, unfound a robbery, but how do

you make a body disappear?” (S3 E1). If it is a “ghetto murder” as McNulty calls it, concern about the body might disappear, if there was any in the first place. A journalist repeats a police adage when he notes the low priority given to story about a murder and quips, “They’re dead in the wrong zip code” (S5 E3).

The economy of *The Wire* might be said to rest on bodies at the bottom. There are condos, careers, and corporations at the top, as well as untold amounts of corruption and crime. But the criminalization of what can only be viewed from the actors’ perspective as a rational response to the conditions created through racialized supremacist policies that externalize suffering and heap it, history repeating itself, on black bodies, poor men’s bodies, women and children’s bodies—any vulnerable body—is what drives the economy of the inner city and builds the rest of the city on top of it.

**Chap 4: Every Child Left Behind:
Reinforcing Cycles of Poverty and Trauma Through the Baltimore School System**

No Child Left Behind

Chapters 1 and 2 of this paper, which focus on redlining and housing policy, are rooted in the policies of the FDR administration. Chapter 3 is shaped by the war on drugs and trickle-down policies of the Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton Administration. The framework for this chapter is provided by the George W. Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB allocated public school funds based on standardized test performance, distinctly disadvantaging underprivileged school communities (NCLB, 2002). Although NCLB initially increased federal funding for public schools, it failed to provide long-term improvements in school funding. Bush frequently failed to request all possible federal dollars for public schools and subsequent budgets reduced funding for public schools in over 40 states (Center for American Progress, 2007). Critics have argued that NCLB created the impossible task of making "all children above average" while failing to provide additional resources for teachers and educators to reach this impossible task (Linn, 2005).

NCLB did not break the public school system. It did, however, exacerbate an already unjust system. In 2002, the first year *The Wire* was filmed, approximately half of all public school funding was generated through local taxes. This allowed public schools in more affluent areas to put more resources into students' education and generally improved education quality for students in richer areas (Biddle & Berliner, 2002). NCLB reinforced this inequality by increasing funding for wealthier schools with higher performing students, while simultaneously decreasing funding for poorer schools with lower performing students.

Baltimore is no exception to this rule. It had a struggling school system already, which was further damaged by NCLB. Much of this thesis has focused on how federal policy led to poverty in Western Baltimore. The causal relationship between redlining and income indicates that, coupled with a bevy of economic forces, redlining led to this poverty, which, in turn, has led to the underfunding of West Baltimore's schools. Baltimore has a disproportionately high number of students of color, 72.3%, in its public schools. Parents who can afford to send their children to private schools, do. The majority of these parents are white (Baltimore Unified School District), making the dysfunction of Baltimore's school system one that primarily affects students of color. In 2003, fiscal mismanagement had pushed the Baltimore school system into a deep financial crisis. Reports estimated that the schools were operating on a \$55 to \$65 million deficit (Baltimore Sun, 2008). Season Four of *The Wire* mirrors this situation as Carcetti realizes that, along with the city's schools, he has inherited a \$54 million debt.

In terms of test scores, Baltimore is the third lowest achieving urban school district in the nation. Only 13% of eighth grade students were proficient in reading in 2017; for math, the number was 14% (Cothran, 2018). This is where we enter the school system of Baltimore in *The Wire*: the eighth grade class of the fictional Edward Tilghman Middle School in West Baltimore. At Tilghman, the well-meaning teachers and administrators are burdened with correcting an array of societal ills well beyond their control. Poverty, trauma, violence, domestic instability, and environmental and health issues plague the lives of the eighth grade students as they try to navigate their coming adulthood in one of America's harshest environments.

Bigger than Edward Tilghman Middle School

One of the most heart-wrenching aspect of *The Wire* is that politicians use the schools as a pawn in their power plays, most notably in Season Three's mayoral race and its ties to the state government. This unfortunate truth should be unsurprising; most all demographics, organizations, and institutions in Baltimore fall victim to similarly unsettling fates. Still, schools serve as the institutional object onto which all citizens can, in theory, project their hopes for the future. Since the nineteenth century, reformers of all stripes have cast schools as the perennial solution to social ills and the ultimate leveller of the playing field (Bell, Jones, & Johnson, 2002). More recently, while the rest of society may be in disarray, conservatives and liberals alike take the stance that individuals motivated to apply themselves to rigors of school can earn their way through their hard work to personal and professional success. *The Wire* shows us the fallacy in this logic; the current education system is as much a solution to poverty as the war drugs was a solution to crime. Stanley Corkin, professor of Film and Media Studies at University of Texas, writes:

Schools replicate the contours of capitalist ideology in their reinscribing of class distinctions, of ever elaborating relative hierarchies, and the need to "get ahead." The problem with Tilghman Middle School is that virtually none of its students will move forward in the conventional sense, which allows us to see that the rhetoric of mobility, despite its implicit and explicit assertions of the fluidity of class, merely serves to entrap the disadvantaged further in a system of class rigidity. (2013, p 135)

While public figures present schools as the solution to American inequality, schools are themselves a product of the same system that created the inequality in the first place. Moreover, they replicate this inequality (Lareau, 2015). Accordingly, schools serve to cement America's class stratification, reinforcing the cyclical nature of American poverty (Entwisle, 2018).

Although the focus of Season Four is the education system, it is not until the third episode that *The Wire* actually takes the viewers into the school building and directly examines the social and pedagogic processes at work. This delay is intentional. Children themselves establish a connection between their experiences at home, in school, and in the community; *The Wire* takes care to contextualize the broader lives of students before depicting their lives in school. Simply put, the dysfunction of the school system is bigger than the school system alone. Like the other institutions examined by *The Wire*, schools draw their function, practice, and meaning from generations of structural racism, disenfranchisement, and segregation. No individual teacher, administrator, or outsider—the well-meaning reformer or researcher—can fix in the internal workings of schools what is inseparable from the world beyond the school walls.

Introducing the Boys of Tilghman

Season Four focuses on the lives of four eighth grade boys: Namond, Randy, Michael, and Duquan (Dukie). Each adolescent comes from a home environment with little stability, little consistency, and little care; they each have no trusted adult to rely upon or turn to, and, instead are on their own in figuring out how to negotiate a world in which they are transitioning to adulthood. Each, as well, finds themselves in a situation somewhat unique among their peers.

Namond is the son of prominent Season One character, Wee-Bey Brice, a successful and reliable Barksdale organization soldier who pleads guilty to the all of the murders committed by anyone in the organization as a means of protecting Avon and Stringer. In exchange for his loyalty and willingness to confess to these murders, Namond and his mom, De'Londa, receive monthly payments from the Barksdale organization. Despite their relative financial comfort and

stability, De'Londa wants Namond to enter the drug trade, pressuring him to work for Bodie Broadus, the long-time corner lieutenant, each day after school. Halfway through the season, the Barksdale organization stops the monthly payments and De'Londa consequently forces Namond to try to get his own corner. De'Londa attempts to use her son to support her in the same manner as did his father. She is accustomed to a certain lifestyle and cannot conceptualize a path for Namond outside the drug trade. Namond shows none of the dispositional qualities his father used as a dealer and muscle man. Namond's boxing coach, Cutty (who also was jailed with Wee-Bey), says of Namond in relation to his father, "Same blood, but ain't the same heart" (S4 E7).

Randy is the son of Eastside dealer Cheese Wagstaff and Prop Joe is Randy's great-uncle. However, these deep familial ties to the industry do not actually play out in an evident way in the series. Instead, the narrative reveals that Randy has been abandoned by his parents and lives with a stern but caring foster mother. Randy is capable, playful, and committed to keeping himself in the good graces of the system, worried primarily about ensuring his foster mother's approval. Michael lives with his drug-addicted mother and his brother, Bug. He cares about his mother but chastises her for irresponsibility. Because of his mother's addiction, Michael handles the family's finances, including its food-stamps and welfare checks. He also is singularly fixed on taking care of Bug, a studious child neglected by their mother and abandoned by his father. Duquan (Dukie) has the most broken life of all. Both of his parents suffer from serious addiction, he is malnourished, and lives in a house with no running water. Duquan's parents sell his clothes and possessions on the street corner for drug money.

What happens in school, particularly the book learning, is far from relevant to the rest of these boys' lives. With such a disconnect, their school experience holds little prospect of providing them tools for opportunities beyond what is currently available to them in their neighborhoods. The school curriculum, largely oriented to fitting the children into the mold set by the standardized tests required by NCLB, amounts to little more than the transmission of facts and fragments of knowledge or the rote application of formulas and skills. Testing requirements put teachers in a difficult and dreary position: getting students engaged in manipulating decontextualized abstractions, like meaningless math word problems, rather than finding concrete phenomena, accessible language, and matters of inherent interest to them as a starting point for learning. Still, administrators and school teachers care about improving the lives of their students. When former-policeman-turned-novice-teacher Roland Pryzbylewski ("Prez") sees Dukie has no food to eat at lunch, he offers Dukie half his sandwich, saying he "packed too much." Prez also lets Dukie in school early every morning to shower, and lets him stay after school ends each day to explore on the class computer. Despite Prez's evident love for and genuine kindness towards Dukie, his efforts to provide direction and stability can only go so far for a child who has no family support, no family to speak of at all.

Dukie is not the only boy who needs help. Michael is smart, mature, handsome and confident. He too, however, experiences trouble when Bug's father returns home from prison to live with them. While not explicitly stated, it is implied that Bug's father molested Michael before he went to prison. The domestic stress the father's return causes takes a toll on Michael's school performance and personality. Prez notices this and tries to help, but is unable to get Michael to talk about his problems. Michael turns to the Stanfield lieutenants, Chris and Snoop,

to “get rid of” Bug’s dad. Coincidentally, Marlo Stanfield had ordered Chris to recruit Michael to their organization after seeing Michael’s integrity and loyalty on the street. Michael initially declined, but after asking for this favor from Chris he feels forever indebted to the Stanfield organization. Consequently, he agrees to serve the organization and is taken in by Chris and Snoop to be trained as a soldier. Randy also finds himself in trouble after incidentally revealing information related to a murder. The Assistant Principal, Ms. Donnelly, learns that Randy has this lead regarding a crime and, by law, must report it to the police. Prez makes sure, though, that the “right police” hear about it to protect Randy from being labeled as a snitch. He calls Cedric Daniels who relays the information to Ellis Carver.

Despite these distracting matters, Prez does his best to teach his students math. He initially begins with the usual word problems and conventional strategies, but finds the approach unsuccessful. Prez shifts tactics after seeing the interest children have in games of chance, and succeeds in teaching his students probability by grounding the pedagogy in their concrete activities of shooting dice, a game which the children frequently play on the street for money. Prez continues to engage the children using these methods until the educational bureaucracy shuts him down.

Prez is informed that he must return back to his old, ineffective way of teaching math—focused on procedures and abstractions rather than concepts and meaning—in order to prepare the children for the standardized exams. His interaction with fellow teacher Grace Sampson summarizes everything that is wrong with Baltimore’s public institutions.

Prez: I don't get it. All this so we score higher on the state tests? If we're teaching the kids the test questions, what is it assessing in them?

Grace: Nothing. It assesses us. The test scores go up, they can say the schools are improving.

Prez: Juking the stats.

Grace: Excuse me?

Prez: Making robberies into larcenies. Making rapes disappear. You juke the stats, and majors become colonels. I've been here before.

Grace: Wherever you go, there you are.

The timing of the bureaucracy's mandate to the teachers to exclusively focus on tests is not coincidental. An episode prior, we see recent Mayor-Elect Thomas Carcetti in a meeting with a Democratic Party strategist. They are planning his gubernatorial run. He gets three clear directives from the strategist: (1) show a 10% drop in crime, (2) get children's educational test scores up, and (3) build something downtown by the waterfront. Carcetti's personal strategist, Norm Wilson, however, tells Carcetti to be silent about the schools until the current year's scores come out, saying, "Our last four administrations left us with an inner-city system with inner-city problems. We get involved, start talking shit, it becomes our mess." In Season Five, Carcetti administration sees a 15-point increase in test scores for one group of children, which Norm says is "enough to run on." Carcetti cannot legitimately claim responsibility for this improvement. In fact, he had only harmed the school district as mayor by declining \$54 million in state aid to cover the district's deficit after realizing it would publicly humiliate him and hurt his chances at governor. Random variation or just luck produced the increase in the limited set of scores. As David Simon points out:

One of the themes of *The Wire* was that statistics will always lie. Statistics can be made to say anything. You show me anything that depicts institutional progress in America: school test scores, crime stats, arrest reports, anything that a politician can run on, anything that somebody can get a promotion on, and as soon as you invent that statistical category, fifty people in that institution will be at work trying to figure out a way to make it look as if progress is actually occurring when actually no progress is. (2017, p. 119)

The schools, just like the police department, are a political tool of America's aristocracy. At the same time, arbitrary success and failures make or break the careers of ambitious aristocrats.

The Boys' Fates

Seasons Five illustrates that a score increase good "enough to run on" is not enough to improve the lives of the students. At the end of Season Four, word gets out on the street that Randy is a snitch and his foster home is attacked with fire bombs leaving his foster mom hospitalized. Overcome with guilt for his role in the tragedy, Carver tries to take Randy into his home as foster child, but bureaucratic barriers make this impossible. Randy is put in a group home, where he is summarily abused for his reputation as a snitch. By Season Five, Randy has grown tall, muscular, and surly, clearly hardened by life in the group home. He refuses to talk to detective Bunk Moreland who visits him at the group home in an effort to gain some information, staring at the policeman defensively until he leaves the building. Randy's fate is not his own failing, nor is it failure of the human heart. His foster mother, for one, and Carver, for another, did their best to save Randy. Rather, Randy's story highlights institutional and bureaucratic failures in Baltimore.

Of the four boys, Namond alone escapes what would be his likely life trajectory. His salvation, however, does not come from any bureaucratic institutions or programs; it comes from human empathy and love. Unlike his one-time colleague Ellis Carver, Bunny Colvin succeeds in securing guardianship for Namond. Bunny has seen that Namond's pathological home life is leading him to a fate somewhere on a continuum between jail and death. (In fact, his mother, suggests to Carver at one point that he send Namond for a stint to a juvenile detention center,

“baby booking,” to prepare him for life as a soldier for a drug organization.) Bunny visits Wee-Bey in prison to ask permission to take custody of Namond.

In Season Five, *The Wire* shows Namond dressed in a suit on stage at a regional debate tournament. Bunny watches proudly from the audience. Outside of the auditorium, Carcetti is holding a press conference to describe the improvement his administration ostensibly produced in third-grade test scores, setting himself up for a gubernatorial run. The same schools that failed Namond and his peers are getting Carcetti to the state house. Away from his mother, a home with care, safety, nourishment, and love gives Namond his way up. Namond does not show particularly more promise than the other boys. Yet, all he needs to become an outstanding student is a stable, emotionally supportive environment outside of West Baltimore. Sociologists Elijah Anderson and Douglas Massey explain:

Social relations [are] spatial relations. No analysis of racial stratification was complete without describing the ecological configurations of class, race, and ethnicity or outlining how their intersection influenced the life chances and social worlds experienced by individuals. Neighborhoods [are] seen as fundamental to the broader system of American stratification. (2001 p. 134)

The outcomes of Namond leaving West Baltimore (red district D4) and moving to Bunny’s comfortable, middle-class neighborhood illustrates the importance of place. Neighborhood, space, and geography are essential in shaping life outcomes. Understanding this concept and the empirical research presented in Chapter 1 of this thesis makes the destructive consequences of redlining all the more clear. Instead of being destined for prison or worse, the move to Bunny’s home made Namond destined for college. While heartwarming, Namond’s story represents the exception, not the norm. Namond serves as a emblem of the many young lives destroyed in the government-created ghetto of West Baltimore.

The Wire reveals the fate of Michael and Dukie in the series's closing montage. Michael drops out of school and becomes a full time gangster in the Stanfield organization. He uses the money he earns to get his own apartment and take care of Bug and Dukie. However, once the BPD arrests Chris on murder charges, Marlo suspects Michael might be snitching. Marlo orders Snoop to kill Michael. Michael, however, recognizes the set up and kills Snoop. Knowing he is a "hot" target, Michael drops Bug off at his aunt's house and distances himself from Dukie to protect him. At the end of the montage, viewers see Michael robbing Marlo's advisor, Vinson, with a shotgun. He has transformed into the new Omar, a smart stick-up man failed by the institutions of Baltimore.

Dukie avoids the game, for which he is dispositionally ill-suited, and wanders from business to business in West Baltimore looking for formal employment. However, because of his education level and young age, no one hires him. In desperate need of money, Dukie begins working for a scrap metal man, helping him collect and load various leftovers and debris into a horse-drawn carriage they use for transport. In its final episode, *The Wire* shows Dukie entering the tent camp where his boss and the other metal men live. The men's violent temperaments, use of drugs, and squalid hovels scare Dukie, but he has no other choice but to live among them. In the closing montage, Dukie slips into a heroin nod. The implications of these scenes is that Dukie is following in the footsteps of Bubbles. The cycle continues.

The same closing montage shows Carcetti as the governor-elect of Maryland, a position of noteworthy fame and power. Carcetti won the gubernatorial election by touting his record on crime and education. His supposed successes result from the same detrimental approaches that lead Michael and Dukie to their respective fates. This montage juxtaposes two contrasting and

often conflicting ways of seeing the world. The one view valorizes institutions and their preservation; the other view prioritizes humanity. The first view sees policies as an end in themselves or as instrumental for political purposes; the second view holds the effect on people as the only criterion of political success. The first view puts credence in statistics; the second cherishes life stories. Carcetti ran his campaign on the presumption that the statistics proved his qualities as leader. But anyone who takes a walk through Baltimore's most desolate areas quickly understands David Simon's assertion that "statistics lie." Carcetti did nothing to improve life for Baltimore's residents.

Season Four targets the schools and their children; Season Five adds further poignancy, meaning, and social critique through the life stories of several of these children. The previous seasons set the stage for this critique. Audiences watching the first three seasons of *The Wire*, whether consciously or not, are likely to be unsettled by the many scenes of children working in the drug trade with little evidence of the kind of institutional supports that characterize a normative American childhood. Preteen "hoppers" race between dealers and stash rooms in the low-rises while young teens sell directly to fiends itching for their next fix. Older teens, still of legally required school age, man the stashes, supervise workers, and bring in cash to sustain themselves and their families.

Older children also care for younger children. Most notably, Wallace, along with his fellow pit worker Poot, shepherds a house full of elementary students in Season One, sending them off in the morning with juice boxes and small bags of chips for their breakfasts, helping them in the evenings with their homework, dishing out discipline and bits of life advice as he can. The arrangement is striking, this slender, pubescent young man heading a household of what

we can assume are children effectively orphaned by their drug-addicted parents through neglect. Notably, Wallace does his best to maintain normalcy for the children even though, shown playing with a toy soldier or learning the rules of chess with wide-eyed wonder, he is portrayed as a childish innocent himself. With a twisted irony, these scenes of Wallace and his household, with the iconic extension cord he runs for hundreds of feet to power his “vacant,” provide the only glimpse of children following familiar aspects of the childhood we might expect, the only indications that the daily trek to school might still be relevant in the world of *The Wire*—albeit in sharp juxtaposition to the life of the street.

Eventually, through the lives of Namond, Randy, Michael, and Dukie—and more or less directly through teachers, administrators, politicians, drop outs, and many others—the audience comes to see school for what it is: another self-perpetuating institution, another pawn in the political game, another set of bureaucracies constraining and derailing lives. School is also, importantly, another arena where well-meaning people, working face to face, warm hand to warm hand, despite the destructive infrastructure around them, make some difference to others. In school, one of the biggest differences could come from the way good teachers might teach. Unfortunately, in the era of NCLB as depicted in *The Wire*, this is rarely possible.

Conclusion

Author Dionne Brand contends that to be a diasporic people is to have a history of cyclical trauma, pain, and familial fracture. Whether in the antebellum south or the contemporary post-industrial American city, these words ring true. This premise is borne out in the varying degrees of tragedy Namond, Raymond, Michael, and Dukie suffer. Although serendipitous

circumstances allow Namond to escape the only world his parents knew, his upbringing of dysfunction, pathology, and violence in that world will never leave him. The child of a notorious drug dealer, Randy has long depended on social services and foster care for his basic survival. The brutal circumstances of Randy's life in the ghetto take even his foster mother from him. Randy ends up in a group home, a situation some describe as "worse than jail." He is clearly hardened by these hostile conditions. The brutalities of the drug trade force the smart and talented Michael, who took financial responsibility for his family from an early age, to leave his brother behind while he makes his living by robbing dealers, much in the mold of Omar Little. Although his success in this endeavor and accompanying notoriety may earn him status in West Baltimore, it will likely also lead him to an early death. Finally, the loving and intellectual Duquan seems destined for a fate similar to that of his parents: drug-addicted and left to fend for himself in the streets of West Baltimore.

Although the schools failed to prepare these children for their future as productive and engaged citizens, this failure is not the schools' fault. Schools face an impossible task: correcting the effects of decades of systemic racist policy and what David Simon calls "raw, unencumbered capitalism, absent any social framework, absent any sense of community, without regard to the weakest and most vulnerable classes in society" (Simon, 2013). Still, employed variably as a sympathetic favorite to attract voters, the basis for personal success, and great social equalizer, schools serve as the institutional object onto which all citizens can project their hopes for the future.

Schools success or failure turns on several factors, the politicians lead their constituents to believe: the available funding, the quality of classroom instruction, the willingness of

teachers' unions to compromise, the degree to which test scores can be ratcheted up, the diligence and grit of students, and the foresight of the citizen to make the right electoral choices in our democracy. In his speeches and private conversations, Carcetti, whose pursuit of election victory the series most closely follows, initially seems committed to the schools, intent on securing the budgetary allocations necessary to avoid cuts to the quality of classroom instruction. But his resolve proves flimsy when it bumps up into his voracious ambitions. The schools get tossed like a ball in the racialized mayoral contest, the only thing we can safely assume is that Carcetti's own children attend a private school. Schools suffer a similar fate when he later runs for governor.

By the end of the series, the relevance of school to children's lives comes with a familiar ring: The game is the game. The game of school has its rules, one in which the "joking of the stats"—in the case of school, test scores—counts in much the same way as it does in the BPD. The game of school also comes with its arbitrariness, institutional rituals and norms that make some sense, but mostly if seen in their historical context as a means for serving the interests of the powerful (for example, see Willis, 2017 on contemporary schooling as a socializing force for industrial-era labor). As Joanna Crosby, evoking the insights of Michel Foucault, says of *The Wire*:

That industrial social institutions developed cohesion and grew into self-perpetuating and interdependent systems is no surprise. Simon's argument is that post-industrial institutions have moved beyond merely using human cogs, and despite rhetoric to the opposite, require the regular sacrifice of individuals to their continued operation. (2013, p.6)

The interlocking efforts of the teachers and students, drug fiends and corner boys, police and kingpins serve the interlocking systems that preserve institutions continually reinventing

themselves. Institutional theory generally suggests that institutions have lives of their own; they are self-preserving and self-perpetuating according to a logic that builds into their very existence the means to continue. This longevity is why they are institutions. Importantly, they also emerge, develop, and evolve as long as they are useful to those with influence and control.

Conclusion

This thesis entered the world of Baltimore through the tragic killing of Freddie Gray. Freddie Gray's passing occurred seven years after the show's conclusion, but in a heartbreaking moment of life imitating art, the destructive forces the series had laid bare and made vivid for audiences across the globe culminated in his tragic death. The series illustrated the consequences when America's law enforcement systems put the exercise of power ahead of the oath to "protect" and "serve." It especially brought to light, in a way rarely done in popular media, the effects of unchecked and brutal treatment of the black body by a supremacist social order that is maintained on the ground by the police. Shortly after Freddie Gray was murdered, articles came out with claims such as, "not learning from Herc and Carver's bust-heads strategy is what killed Freddie Gray" (Woods, 2012). While such claims carried an element of truth, they ultimately missed the deeper point. Season Four shows the audience an unarmed Omar Little violently tackled, beaten, and thrown unsecured into the back of a police wagon. This process for arresting a suspect is the exact one that killed Freddie Gray. But in comparison to the magnitude of the acts of injustice portrayed in the show, this scene doesn't even register. It comes across as standard procedure, the viewer so numbed to actions such as this one that there is nothing noteworthy to learn. It is just another day in Baltimore.

What *The Wire* teaches is that the conditions that killed Freddie Gray are much broader and more complex than simply the prevalence of police brutality. The cause of the disease is unchecked capitalism, particularly as it operates in a legal system where the rich can do no

wrong and the poor can do no right. The series awakens audiences to the consequences of centuries of supremacist policies, policies so masked, ignored, or culturally ingrained that they are forgotten, taken for granted as a natural part of American life. David Simon says, “That may be the ultimate tragedy of capitalism in our time, that it has achieved its dominance without regard to a social compact, without being connected to any other metric for human progress” (Simon, 2013). Capitalism that carries no responsibility, intentionally disregarding the effects of its operations, outcomes, and externalities on social well-being is what killed Freddie Gray.

This capitalism—late-stage, amoral, and amuck—is the root of American police brutality. As one anonymous BPD officer said in 2001 of Western District residents, “Everyone is drugged out, like that zombie movie. You pull up a sheet and cockroaches are running around the bed. Who can sleep like this? Drugged-out, lazy motherfuckers. These people don’t want to work. Let them shoot each other” (Collins & Brody, 2013). To this man in blue, black lives most decidedly do not matter. His antipathy is not because of skin color, but because of economic situation. The tragic irony here is that this economic situation has been intentionally crafted by white America. Nonetheless, in the worldview articulated by the anonymous officer, poor African Americans are already dead, they are already zombies, and killing them, by logical extension, is not morally wrong. America has not merely criminalized it, but has effectively dehumanized poverty, dehumanized the people among us who live with the least means. This shameful truth explains how and why economic discrimination killed Freddie Gray.

The Wire re-humanizes the dehumanized. It shows the citizens of West Baltimore not as lazy, impulsively violent, irrational agents, but rather as complex individuals trying to play the unfair hands they were dealt. *The Wire* sits its audience in the midst of this effort, much of which

is entangled with the drug trade. Absent formal industry and economic opportunity in the poorer sectors of Baltimore, the drug trade emerged to fill a vacuum and functions just as any industry does. It follows market dynamics and has competition, oligopolies, monopolies, and cartels. At times, consumers have power; at other times, the suppliers are in control. As in any other industry, the drug trade has well-intended individuals determined to ameliorate some of its detrimental effects (Prop Joe) and ambitious leaders determined to do whatever it takes to get to the top (Marlo Stanfield). The violence the drug trade entails does not stem from unrestrained emotion or careless action, but rather from calculated choice. It is a business decision designed to increase one's market share in an environment where resources are scarce and competition fierce. In environments where there is little to no other economic opportunity, such business decisions are essential to personal survival as well.

But what separates the drug trade from other industries is its intense criminalization, a criminalization rooted in centuries of white supremacist ideology. Drugs *per se* were never the real enemy in the war on drugs; if they were, the federal government would have declared a war on the pharmaceutical industry long ago. Loss of life was not a motivating factor for this pseudo-war either. America has a history of supporting “harm industries” and going to war for markets, land, or oil. What America cannot abide is economic equality for all—black Americans included.

The past century of federal, state, and local policies provides evidence for this view; these were policies federal legislators and bureaucrats intentionally created to benefit the winners in America's racialized economy. In the FDR administration, redlining and public housing policy served as an effective way to control African Americans' access to land and property. A

deliberately created and enforced scarcity of economic resources in these redline areas made aggressive competition among residents a key to survival. The housing policies of the New Deal created the geographic backdrop for the economic activity portrayed in *The Wire*. “Red” areas—starved of investment, credit access, and formal opportunity—are the ones where the drug trade thrives. When Avon says to Marlo “I got nothing but love in my heart for Westside niggas, but fuck them Eastside bitches” (S5 E2), he may not know it, but he is talking about the consequences of redlining—in this case, the intentional creation of two rival ghettos in the heart of Baltimore.

While the FDR administration may have created the setting for *The Wire*, the war on drugs provides the plot. *The Wire* portrays a constant negotiation between Baltimore’s informal economy and its formal institutions. Throughout the show, victims of institutional racism struggle to find a financial foothold in America’s unforgiving economic order. Simultaneously, police, politicians, and lawyers find ways to advance their careers from the cash and off the despair inherent in the repetitive cycles of the drug trade. This rhythm finds its roots in the outlandishly racist war on drugs. Nixon’s “law and order” campaign of the late 1960s launched a much ballyhooed war on drugs that was, ironically, cut short by Nixon’s own crimes. Reagan managed to continue Nixon’s slide into hypocrisy by declaring, “Government exists to protect us from each other. Where government has gone beyond its limits is in deciding to protect us from ourselves” (Moran et. al, 2019). At the very same time, Reagan was intensifying Nixon’s war on drugs, doing what exactly he said was “beyond the limits of government” by criminalizing non-violent drug offenders and jailing them to protect them from themselves. Subsequently, Bill

Clinton ran a presidential campaign on a platform of criminal reform and then proceeded to incarcerate more Americans than any of his predecessors.

Currently, we have a president who continues his predecessors' legacy of racism, albeit somewhat more ostentatiously. In the decades prior to assuming the presidency, Donald Trump was sued for discriminating against black tenants and also called for the death penalty for five black and Latino Americans who were accused of rape. They were all exonerated. Many journalists and commentators view Trump's "birther" attack on the legitimacy of Barack Obama's presidency—which argued that he was born in Kenya, not the U.S.—as the inherently racist launch of his presidential campaign. Recently, news broke that Donald Trump said only "black people could live like this," while driving through a Chicago neighborhood (Scott, 2019).

Our president has sought to racially categorize and discount the lives of millions of Americans, part of a worldwide resurgence of white nationalism and overt supremacism. The depth, nuance, and emotional verisimilitude of *The Wire*, even in its decades-old view of the institutional dysfunction in America's cities, give audiences an avenue to confront, pierce, and combat this type of flagrant white supremacist rhetoric. *The Wire* shows us the effects of institutional racism and highlights the flaws of blaming individual agents for their circumstance. It is grossly misguided to blame Bodie or Michael for joining the drug trade, just as it is grossly misguided to blame Dukie or Wallace for using drugs. *The Wire* helps the viewer understand these characters not as criminals, but as human beings battling for survival amid America's harshest economic and social conditions. Despite the brutal reality it works to present, rather than being nihilistic or even pessimistic, it conveys a profound respect for the individual, no matter his or her positionality, perspectives, or predilections. Its radically rehumanizing stance coupled

with its commitment to telling the truth liberates its audience from false hopes, dishonest assumptions, and pointless expectations.

The true crime *The Wire* brings to light is not the drug trade or even its concomitant violence, but the willingness of the majority of Americans to sit idly, oblivious to, or, worse, indifferently observing the destructive conditions they created. This is the power of *The Wire*: It forces you to reconsider who the real criminal is.

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Appendix

Section 1: Geocoding Methods

I used ArcGIS geographic analysis software to integrate my two sets of maps for my empirical analysis. The HOLC map data can be downloaded as a geocoded shapefile which includes latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates. The Opportunity Atlas data, however, cannot be downloaded and must be manually georectified. Georectifying is a method of manually linking geo-coordinates to a map that has no digital coordinates attached to it. I manually georectified the Opportunity Atlas for Baltimore by using ArcGIS's toolbar to add ground control points (GCPs). GCPs are identifiable points that can be exactly located in the image and the coordinate system. I primarily used street intersections and their appropriate coordinates to georectify the Opportunity Atlas data. Additionally, I used geographic features such as cemeteries and parks to further ensure accuracy in the geocoding process. This paper used 19 GCPs (well above what ArcGIS recommends).

Once the Opportunity Atlas was georectified, I was able to superimpose the DSL HOLC maps onto the respective Opportunity Atlas data (each referred to here as an Opportunity Map). Image 5 shows the HOLC boundaries in black superimposed on the geocoded Opportunity Map tracts for the city of Baltimore.

I use census tracts as a my unit of measurement for distance, so a tract directly next to an HOLC border is coded as a ± 1 , and a tract with one other tract in between it at the HOLC border receives a ± 2 , etc. If the census tract is bordering a redline district with a higher grade than itself it is assigned a negative value. If it is bordering a district with a lower grade than itself it is assigned a positive value.

Section 2: Regression Methods

Using the combined geocoded maps I made in ArcGIS, I am able to see each census tract within the HOLC boundaries (see Image 5). For my analysis, I assigned each tract a number to give it a distance measure from an HOLC district boundary. For the model, tracts that border HOLC districts with a higher HOLC grade than their own are assigned a negative distance value of -1, while tracts that border a tract with a lower HOLC grade receive a positive distance value of +1. Distance values are increased by the number of tracts in between any given tract and an HOLC border. For example, a lower-rated yellow tract touching a border with a higher-rated blue tract would receive a distance value of -1, while the blue tract would have a distance value of +1. A second yellow tract with another yellow tract in between it and the border with the blue tract would receive a distance value of -2, and so forth. Correspondingly, a yellow tract touching a red tract border would receive a distance value of +1 and a yellow tract with another yellow tract in between it and the red tract border would receive a distance value of +2.

My regression model takes the following form:

$$y_{is} = \alpha + \beta 1(dist_{is}^n < 0) + (dist_{is}^n < 0) \sum_{n=1}^N \theta_n dist_{is}^n + (dist_{is}^n > 0) \sum_{n=1}^N \gamma_n dist_{is}^n + \mu_s + \varepsilon_{is}$$

(Equation 1)

In this model y_{is} is the outcome variable of interest (income or incarceration rate). β represents the change in the outcome variable due to the HOLC boundaries. N represents a polynomial that controls for continuous change in the outcome variable due to changes in the *dist* variable. I run my regressions up to a fourth-degree polynomial ($N=4$). μ_s represents section fixed effect. Each

number value of s corresponds to an HOLC district, helping to control for variation across these districts. ε_{is} represents the error term and α represents a constant.

Section 3: Regression Variables and Results

I use a quartic polynomial of the *dist* variable in my regression design to derive a causal relationship between HOLC boundaries and the two outcome variables being sought. This approach is similar to Nickerson and Appel (2016), who used the distance of homes from HOLC borders. Their study measured distance from the HOLC boundary in miles as distinct from this study which assigns values to census tracts as the unit of distance measurement. In Tables 2a and 2b, *Dneg* represents a dummy variable that is equal to 1 when my distance variable is less than 0 ($dist_i^n < 0$), and 0 when it is not. *Dpos* is the opposite and is equal to 1 when my distance variable is greater than 0. *Dnegdist* and *Dposdist* are formed by multiplying *Dneg* and *Dpos* by the applicable *dist* variable. The polynomials $Dnegdist^2$, $Dnegdist^3$, and $Dnegdist^4$ are created by squaring, cubing, and multiplying to the fourth power the *Dnegdist* variable. Similarly, I create the polynomials $Dposdist^2$, $Dposdist^3$, and $Dposdist^4$ by squaring, cubing, and multiplying to the fourth power my *Dposdist* variable.

The fourth order polynomial in these regressions show a statistically significant relationship between HOLC borders and projected neighborhood incomes. The first, second, and third order polynomials fail to generate statistical significance and, thus, help to explain my model's fit with the data while they highlight the need for a fourth order polynomial regression. In the fourth order polynomial regression, the *Dneg*, $Dnegdist^2$, $Dnegdist^3$ and $Dnegdist^4$

variables are statistically significant at the .05 and .1 levels, while the *Dnegdist* is statistically significant to the .1 level. Furthermore, the R-squared value of .795 indicates a good fit between and the data my model.

It is important to note the impact of including *section fixed effect*, with *section* representing each HOLC district. As can be seen by Table 4a in the Appendix, excluding this fixed effect aspect would undercut the statistical significance of this study's regression results. *Dneg* represents the total effect on projected income of being born on the negative (lower-graded) graded side of an HOLC border. The resulting value of -22.78 or \$22,780 in expected annual income in Baltimore makes it clear redlining still has a strong effect on the economic landscape of the city. To estimate the average net effect of redlining on projected income in Baltimore, I use the following formula:

$$Dneg - (Dnegdist) + (Dnegdist^2) - (Dnegdist^3) + (Dnegdist^4)$$

Plugging in the appropriate values for the above variables, I obtain an answer of -13.06 or \$13,060. I then use this number to calculate the break or jump in income at an HOLC border. I use a similar formula for my *Dpos* variables:

$$(Dposdist) + (Dposdist^2) + (Dposdist^3) + (Dposdist^4)$$

Plugging the variables into the formula and then subtracting the above \$13,060 from the value, I obtain, a difference of \$2,080. This means that being born in a census tract immediately

touching a higher graded HOLC district, causes one to have a projected annual income greater than \$2,000 less than one who is born immediately on the other side of that border. In the extreme case, this theoretically implies that two individuals born into adjacent homes on either side of an HOLC border could have over a 2,000 dollar discrepancy in projected future annual income solely because of the existence of that historical boundary.

I have included regressions for each of three types of border jump. Tables 5a, 5b, and 5c in the Appendix show the effect of red-yellow border jump, a yellow-blue border jump, and a blue-green border jump respectively in each city. While the results are intriguing, they fail to generate consistent statistical significance due to the small sample size. Even though it's been 50 years since the practice of redlining formally ended, redlining still affects the economic landscape of Baltimore. With the racialized history of the redlining process, this data helps to explain the stark economic inequality of Baltimore today.

The relationship between redlining and incarceration is not as empirically strong as the relationship between redlining and income. This is understandable because income and wealth are the pathway that connects a causal relationship between redlining and incarceration. Still, the third order polynomial regression generates statistically significant coefficients at the .1 level for the $Dneg$, $Dnegdist$, $Dnegdist^2$, and $Dnegdist^3$ variables.

The first, second, and fourth order polynomials fail to generate any statistical significance. This indicates the cubic polynomial transformation is the best model fit for the data sets. This regression has an R-squared value of .6767, indicating a decent fit with the data. Again, *section* including *section fixed effect* has a significant impact on the results of these regressions. Table 4b in the appendix shows the regression without Sect. FE.

The coefficient on *Dneg* in my third order polynomial regression shows the total effect on projected incarceration rates of being born on the negative (lower-graded) side of an HOLC border. Its value of 3.24 suggests redlining does affect incarceration rates in Baltimore. Again, I take the difference between the following formulas to find the effect of an HOLC border between two homes in adjacent census tracts on projected incarceration rates:

$$(Dneg - (Dnegdist) + (Dnegdist^2) - (Dnegdist^3)) - ((Dposdist) + (Dposdist^2) + (Dposdist^3))$$

Using the appropriate values in the following formula, I obtain a value of .74. This means a child born in a census tract adjacent to an HOLC border but on the lower graded side is .74% more likely to be incarcerated in their lifetime than a child born on in an adjacent tract on the other side of the border. While .74% may not appear to be a meaningful number, it is a significant increase in low single-digit incarceration rates. This finding presents the first known empirical connection between redlining and incarceration rates and provides an avenue to explore for a heightened understanding of America's racialized prison system.

Section 4: Regression Tables

Table 3a*Non-fixed Effect Baltimore Income Regressions*

	Polynomial Order			
	First	Second	Third	Fourth
<i>Dneg</i>	-3.54 (2.28)	-3.71 (3.45)	-.82 (8.73)	-17.89 (21.97)
<i>Dnegdist</i>	-.27 (.52)	4.13 (1.89)	11.21 (6.34)	-26.96 (19.11)
<i>Dnegdist²</i>	NA	.65 (.27)	3.00 (2.02)	-17.18 (9.75)
<i>Dnegdist³</i>	NA	NA	.21 (.18)	-3.86 (1.93)
<i>Dnegdist⁴</i>	NA	NA	NA	-.27 (.13)
<i>Dposdist</i>	2.02 (.80)	-3.35 (2.88)	-7.07 (9.50)	2.49 (33.54)
<i>Dposdist²</i>	NA	1.04 (.54)	2.53 (3.65)	-3.16 (19.48)
<i>Dposdist³</i>	NA	NA	-1.67 (.40)	1.15 (4.46)
<i>Dposdist⁴</i>	NA	NA	NA	-.10 (.35)
<i>-cons</i>	31.46 (1.73)	36.79 (3.23)	39.31 (6.93)	34.19 18.57

Observations=284; Sect. FE=43; Median 31.89

Table 3b*Non-fixed Effect Baltimore Incarceration Rate Regressions*

	Polynomial Order			
	First	Second	Third	Fourth
<i>Dneg</i>	1.90 (.18)	2.02 (.90)	4.47 (1.89)	2.72 (4.80)
<i>Dnegdist</i>	.18 (.11)	-.22 (.41)	2.21 (1.37)	-.70 (4.17)
<i>Dnegdist²</i>	NA	-.06 (.06)	.75 (.44)	-.80 (2.13)
<i>Dnegdist³</i>	NA	NA	.07 (.04)	-.24 (.42)
<i>Dnegdist⁴</i>	NA	NA	NA	-.02 (.03)
<i>Dposdist</i>	-.21 (.17)	.38 (.63)	1.26 (2.06)	1.15 (7.32)
<i>Dposdist²</i>	NA	-.12 (.12)	-.46 (.79)	-.40 (4.25)
<i>Dposdist³</i>	NA	NA	.04 (.09)	.02 (.97)
<i>Dposdist⁴</i>	NA	NA	NA	.00 (.08)
<i>-cons</i>	2.76 (.37)	2.18 (.70)	1.58 (1.50)	1.64 (4.06)

Observations=284; Sect. FE=43; Median=3.31

Table 4a
HOLC Red-Yellow Border Effects on
Income in Baltimore

	Polynomial Order	
	Third	Fourth
<i>Dneg</i>	3.68 (7.24)	-8.07 (9.97)
<i>Dnegdist</i>	4.83 (7.34)	-14.16 (16.02)
<i>Dnegdist²</i>	1.17 (2.54)	-9.05 (8.08)
<i>Dnegdist³</i>	.06 (.22)	-2.05 (1.58)
<i>Dnegdist⁴</i>	NA	-.14 (.10)
<i>Dposdist</i>	1.32 (7.61)	0 (-)
<i>Dposdist²</i>	-1.73 (3.66)	-.81 (1.68)
<i>Dposdist³</i>	.39 (.50)	.12 (1.03)
<i>Dposdist⁴</i>	NA	.02 (.15)
<i>Observations=97</i>		

Table 4b
HOLC Yellow-Blue Border Effects on
Income in Baltimore

	Polynomial Order	
	Third	Fourth
<i>Dneg</i>	-2.83 (6.76)	0 (-)
<i>Dnegdist</i>	-2.12 (4.42)	10.25 (48.83)
<i>Dnegdist²</i>	-3.21 (2.36)	1.23 (7.83)
<i>Dnegdist³</i>	-.65 (.29)	1.23 (7.83)
<i>Dnegdist⁴</i>	NA	.16 (.69)
<i>Dposdist</i>	1.76 (6.37)	-17.36 (34.06)
<i>Dposdist²</i>	-.77 (2.18)	10.40 (20.81)
<i>Dposdist³</i>	.10 (.24)	-2.43 (4.62)
<i>Dposdist⁴</i>	NA	.19 (.34)
<i>Observations=103</i>		

Table 4c
HOLC Blue-Green Border Effects on
Income in Baltimore

	Polynomial Order	
	Third	Fourth
<i>Dneg</i>	-53.82 (22.29)	-57.43 (23.47)
<i>Dnegdist</i>	8.07 (14.23)	-48.29 (35.88)
<i>Dnegdist²</i>	2.94 (4.63)	-26.14 (17.01)
<i>Dnegdist³</i>	.25 (.41)	-5.47 (3.08)
<i>Dnegdist⁴</i>	NA	-.37 (.19)
<i>Dposdist</i>	-61.74 (30.17)	0 (-)
<i>Dposdist²</i>	29.58 (13.81)	-13.64 (7.50)
<i>Dposdist³</i>	-4.13 (1.86)	8.22 (4.25)
<i>Dposdist⁴</i>	NA	-1.23 (.61)
<i>Observations=63</i>		

Section 5: The Wire Character List

Avon Barksdale: West Baltimore's drug kingpin for the first three seasons. A true gangster, Avon gets 30 years in prison at the end of Season 3.

Bodie Broadus: A drug dealer in the Barksdale organization first shown in the pit with D, Wallace, and Poot. Bodie is smart and loyal. In Season 4, Marlo forces Bodie to join his organization and eventually Marlo kills him.

Brother Mouzone: A notorious and respected drug world enforcer and hitman from New York hired by Barksdale.

Bruce DiBiago: A lobbyist hired by Frank Sobotka.

Bubbles: A drug addict and criminal informant, Bubbles gets clean by Season 5.

Bunk Moreland: An excellent homicide detective and friend of Jimmy McNulty.

Bunny Colvin: Initially a Western District commander, Bunny is relieved of duty after his Hamsterdam experiment is revealed. He then works as research assistant at Edward Tilghman Middle School. In this position he meets Namond Brice and subsequently becomes his guardian.

Cedric Daniels: Cedric leads every successful major case in *The Wire*. Cedric is smart and moral. Cedric starts as a lieutenant and eventually becomes police commissioner. He is initially married to Marla Daniels but they separate after he refuses to switch to a career in law.

Cheryl: Kima's ex-partner. Cheryl pressures Kima to leave the police force.

Chris Partlow: Marlo's primary enforcer. The most prolific killer in *The Wire*.

Clay Davis: A corrupt West Baltimore state senator. Clay receives money from the drug trade and other illicit sources.

Clarence Royce: Baltimore's mayor in Season 3. He loses to Thomas Carcetti in Season 4.

D'Angelo (D) Barksdale: Avon's nephew. D runs the pit in Season 1 before being incarcerated. D hates the violence of the drug trade.

Dennis "Cutty" Wise: A reformed ex-con, Cutty opens up a boxing gym for at-risk youth.

Elena McNulty: A realtor and McNulty's ex-wife.

Ellis Carver: Initially shown as an aggressive Baltimore detective, Carver develops into a thoughtful and intelligent police officer.

Ervin Burrell: Baltimore's police commissioner for most of the show.

Felicia “Snoop” Pearson: Marlo’s second most trusted enforcer.

Frank Sobotka: Treasurer and secretary of the local stevedore’s union. Frank gets involved in the drug trade to save the union.

Herc: An aggressive and impulsive BPD officer.

Jimmy McNulty: The show’s protagonist. Jimmy hates the bureaucracy of the police department. Jimmy is smart but disregards BPD’s chain of command.

Kima Greggs: An intelligent and tough Baltimore detective. Some say she is the first black lesbian in American television.

Lester Freamon: The show’s most competent police officer. Lester has a knack for following the money trail of the West Baltimore drug trade.

Marcia Donnelly: Serves at Edward J. Tilghman Middle School as Assistant Principal.

Malik “Poot” Carr: Bodie’s best friend. Poot is the only member of the Barksdale organization who appears in all 5 seasons and does not end up dead or incarcerated.

Marlo Stanfield: Marlo is a violent West Baltimore kingpin. He runs the Baltimore drug trade in Seasons 4 and 5.

Maurice Levy: A capable but corrupt lawyer in Baltimore defending drug organizations.

Michael Lee: An intelligent and loyal young man. Michael gets recruited to join the Stanfield organization.

Namond: Son of the legendary Barksdale enforcer Wee-Bey. Namond gets adopted by Bunny Colvin.

Nick Sobotka: Frank Sobotka’s nephew. Nick turns to the drug trade due to the decline of the port economy.

Norman Wilson: Carcetti’s policy advisor.

Old Face Andre: A store owner who deals drugs for Marlo. Marlo has him killed after he is robbed by Omar Little.

Omar Little: A legendary homosexual stick-up artist. Omar robs Baltimore drug dealers for a living but lives by a strict moral code. Omar’s complexity makes him perhaps the show’s most famous character.

Proposition Joe: An Eastside kingpin, Joe prefers cooperation to violence.

Randy Wagstaff: A friend of Michael and Namond. Randy is failed by the BPD and ends up in a group home.

Roland “Prez” Przybylski: Initially a violent police officer. Prez evolves into a competent detective and then a school teacher.

Ronda Perlman: A narcotics prosecutor in Baltimore.

Russell “Stringer” Bell: Avon’s right hand man. Stringer takes economics classes and wants to be a legitimate businessman.

The Greeks: The supplier of Baltimore’s best heroin. They buy containers from Frank Sobotka. They never get caught, despite being Baltimore’s most prolific drug traffickers.

Tommy Carcetti: Initially a city council member, the ambitious Carcetti is elected mayor in Season 4. While at first the viewer believes Carcetti may bring change to Baltimore, he quickly proves to be another self-serving politician.

Wallace: Poot and Bodie’s best friend. Wallace doesn’t have the heart for the game. Stringer orders Bodie and Poot to kill him at the end of Season 1. Wallace is one of the most tragic characters in the show.

Ziggy Sobotka: Frank’s son. Ziggy deeply desires power and respect. Ultimately, these desires lead him to be arrested on murder charges at the end of Season 2.

Section 6: The Wire Images



Figure 4: Wallace (left), D (standing), and Bodie (right) get a hard life lesson from chess.



Figure 5: Bunny Colvin enjoying a glass of orange juice on the porch of his middle class townhouse.



Figure 6: The Franklin Towers being demolished.



Figure 7: Omar calmy testifies in court.



Figure 8: Avon explains to Stringer that he is just a gangster, not a businessman.



Figure 9: Bodie and Poot in a Barksdale planning meeting



Figure 10: Stringer Bell attempting to transition into a downtown business man.



Figure 11: D, Poot, and Wallace enjoy some chicken nuggets in the pit while discussing the nature of capitalism.



Figure 12: Avon explains to D that the violence in the game is always business.



Figure 13: Marla and Cedric Daniels discussing Cedrics future over dinner.



Figure 14: Stringer (left) and Prop Joe (right) discuss forming a co-op.



Figure 15: Stringer in economics class.



Figure 16: Frank Sobatka (front) and one of The Greeks discuss business by the waterfront.



Figure 17: An irate Clay Davis in the Mayor's office.



Figure 18: From left to right: Michael, Namond, unknown, Dukie, and Randy



Figure 19: Marlo (facing the camera) chastises Old Face Andre.



Figure 20: Detectives Jimmy McNulty and Bunk Moreland both struggle with alcoholism.

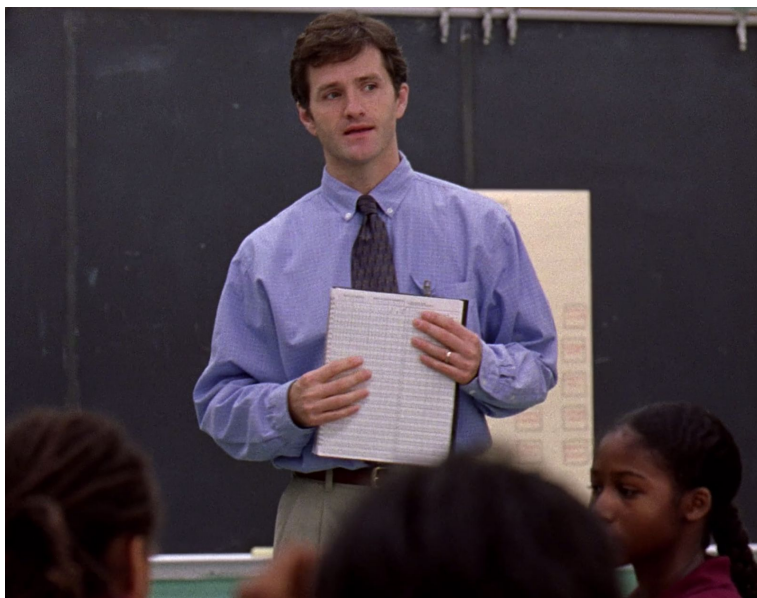


Figure 21: Prez teaching his first class.



Figure 22: A determined Carcetti on the campaign trail.



Figure 23: Bubbles Depot servicing the residents of West Baltimore.